Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

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Dazzling Space Novelet by RANDALL D. GARRETT

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—from an unsolicited letter

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SCIENCE FICTION

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It was a race between man and alien to rule the stars. Scientifically, the aliens were decades ahead—but their real advantage was their incredible elusiveness!

The Best of Fences

by RANDALL GARRETT

ROMM PARMAY stepped into the Interstellar Communications Central and eased the door shut behind him.

Nobody paid much attention to him; the five hundred ICC men at the boards were talking in quiet, well-modulated voices that filled the

room with a fluctuating murmur of unintelligible sound.

At Number One board, Kerrman was staring moodily at the dead screen, blowing clouds of cigarette smoke at the control panel and watching the smoke writhe and flow down around the pilot lights and switch plates. Parmay walked across the room quietly, and stopped a few feet behind Kerrman.

"Boo!"

Kerrman jerked, inhaled a cloud of smoke, coughed, and turned around, glaring.

"Romm! Dammit, if you weren't my boss, I'd kick you where it would do the most good!"

Parmay turned solemnly, presenting his gluteal region for assault.

"Go ahead," he said sorrowfully, "I'm not the boss any more."

"All right, you're asking—*what? What did you say?*"

Parmay turned back to face Kerrman. The grin on his face threatened to break into laughter.

"Let you be the first to congratulate me. You are gazing at the Chief of Psychological Contact."

"Contact!" Kerrman grinned back. "You mean you're going out with the fleet?"

"Right. They just told me. I've got to get myself a group together, one for each hypersee ship. So far, I am the head cheese of a totally nonexistent group; I'm nobody's boss."

"Need a good assistant?" Kerrman asked hopefully.

"No, I need a good contact here. You've got my job now, and more. There isn't room on a ship to carry a complete psych analyzer, much less a synthesizer, so, for anything I dig up, you'll have to do most of the math."

"Good enough. I have—" Kerrman stopped suddenly and looked at his watch. "Wow! Almost talked too long. There's an Ancestor due in five minutes."

He sat down again at the board, cutting in the instruments. A shadow pointer moved slowly up a dial, then stopped.

"Not early, at any rate," he commented.

Better than four hundred light years away, a hypersee communicator fired out its carrier; at vast multiples of the velocity of light, that disturbance radiated in all directions through space. Less than a thousandth of a second after leaving its origin, the carrier was nudging the receptors on Earth.

On Kerrman's panel the

shadow pointer began a smoothly oscillating dance. Kerrman touched three switch plates in swift succession. A voice came from the speaker.

"Expedition Seven Nine Six calling Earth. Seven Nine Six calling Earth. Come in, Earth."

The accent was odd, and most people would have had trouble understanding it, but Kerrman was used to handling the changes that had taken place in the language in four centuries.

"Communications Central, Earth," he replied. "We're in, Seven Nine Six."

"Seven Nine Six in," said the speaker definitely. "We've been here twenty-four hours. How long have we been gone?"

"You're four minutes late; not bad correlation at all. You left Earth four hundred thirteen years, seventy-one days, two hours, thirty seconds as of now." He touched a button to produce a *ting!* "What's your subjective time?"

"Eleven years, sixty-two days, twelve hours, five minutes even as of now." A similar sound came from the speaker.

Kerrman jabbed the figures into the MAC for subjective-objective time correlation.

"Any sign of the enemy?" he asked next.

"None. They haven't landed here. We've scouted the planet carefully."

Romm Parmay, standing beside Kerrman, shook his head resignedly. No sign of them. There never was.

KERRMAN'S next job was pure psychology. That was the reason for assigning a psych engineer to the first receiver. Each call from a ship coming out of near-light drive was picked up by this board.

Kerrman glanced at the dossier on the desk before him; the four-century-old dossier that contained complete information on Expedition 796 as she had been when she left Earth.

"Am I speaking to Commander Loris Cay?"

"No. He passed away seven years ago, subjective time. I am Lieutenant William Bowman, commanding."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lieutenant." Kerrman looked at the blank screen and wished that hypersee vision transmission had been in existence when Expedition 796 was launched. It was easier to judge a man's psych reaction by his face than by his voice alone.

"Lieutenant, can you under-

stand me all right? I've had a chance to study your pronunciation, but how does mine sound to you?"

The lieutenant admitted it was odd but perfectly clear.

"Good. Then I'll give you a brief synopsis of the history of the past four hundred years.

"When you left the only hint we had that another race was colonizing the galaxy was the sounds, which we assumed to be speech, that came over certain frequencies of the hypersee band. Since then, we have perfected vision transmission; we can see them now. And they're not pretty to look at.

"We still have no way of knowing where a hypersee wave is coming from; they are non-directional, at least insofar as we have been able to discover, so we still don't know from which direction the enemy is approaching.

"We haven't been able to correlate their vision with their voice transmission, so we still don't have any key to their language. Luckily, we're fairly sure that they don't have any key to ours, either.

"A little over a century ago, we detected something else on the hypersee band. It sounded like a weird sort of static; a whining sort of thing. The only source that could put out that kind of disturbance was found to be material objects traveling faster than the velocity of light.

"That gave us our first clue —the first hint that hypersee ships could be built. We figured that if the aliens had them, we could get them, too.

"It took better than thirty years, but we've got it now. Our hypersee fleet has been consolidating the colonies for two hundred light years out, and we're constantly expanding.

"Within the next year, we'll be able to ship you supplies and materiel, which will speed up your colonization by about fifty years. You'll have a going civilization there in your lifetime instead of the three generations that the planners originally estimated.

"These are the major developments. Any questions, Lieutenant?"

There were questions, of course, plenty of them, but Parmay didn't pay much attention to them. Those pioneers the ICC jokingly called the Ancestors were time travelers in a very real sense of the word. They came out of near-light drive to find that the rest of the universe had passed them up; they were anachronisms.

It hadn't been too bad at first; they were not too far displaced from their own time, those who had first reported in, centuries ago.

But now they found that their speech was old-fashioned and their beautiful new ships were completely outmoded. They could not be told immediately that the new hypersee ships were transporting colonists to the stars faster than the old near-light ships were coming out of the fitzgerald. They could not be told that they had gone out in vain.

A psych engineer had to be careful in telling them what had happened. The old ships had served their purpose, of course; without them, the race of man would not be nearly as far flung through the stars as it was now. But it would be hard to convince the Ancestors that they were still performing a useful function—unless a psych engineer told them so.

KERRMAN had assigned 796 a report schedule and had cut the connection. He looked up at Parmay.

"If I'm the boss now, I can knock off any time I please. There won't be another Ancestor for three days; Eight-Oh-Two is due then. As soon as I get all the dope on this one correlated, I'd like to talk to you. Where're you headed now?"

Parmay grinned. "I'm going to tell Alina. I want to watch her blow her stack. I'll see you at my place as soon as you quit. Okay?"

"Good enough. Don't shock your everlovin' too much."

"Hah!" Parmay *hah'd.* "That woman is about as shockproof as they come."

Parmay left communications and took a drop down sixty-three levels to the Hypersee Physics section. Alina's lab was deadly silent when he opened the door. The four technicians under her were watching their instruments and ignoring the door.

Parmay resisted the impulse to pull the same gag on his wife that he had pulled on Kerrman. It might ruin an expensive research project.

Alina Starrnel's blonde, closely-cropped head was bent over an array of instruments that meant almost nothing to her husband. She moved her hand over a series of switch plates and looked up at the screen facing her.

The un-normal face of an alien stared out at her with its blank eyes. The fronds on the face flickered gently.

Parmay watched for the

better part of ten minutes as the face blurred, shifted, and underwent other strange transformations beneath Alina's manipulations of the controls. Her technicians spoke softly now and then, making small adjustments in the instruments they were controling.

Suddenly Alina slapped at the switch plates. The alien face in the screen had faded out. "Damn!" she said softly.

She turned to the four technicians. "Get as much out of that as you can, though I'm pretty sure we've lost another round."

"Bong!" said Parmay. "Round over."

"Romm!" Alina turned, seeing him for the first time. "What are you doing here?"

"Got bored. Decided I needed a kiss."

"Well, come get it."

He did.

"Now," she said, "the truth. You don't come wandering down here at this time of day to neck. Out with it."

"I came to take you to lunch."

"At this hour? I don't usually take off this early."

"My darling Alina, I have something to tell you, and I am sure that you'll need something in your stomach to brace you when I tell it."

Alina put her palms to her temples and looked at the ceiling.

"Oh, *no!* This is what comes of being a psych engineer! He comes in and makes a remark like that because he knows damned good and well that I would drop anything to find out what he's being so mysterious about!" She dropped her hands and looked back at Romm. "All right," she snarled in mock viciousness, "I'll come. But you can't get away with this forever!"

The Colonization Program Building filled better than a cubic mile of the city's space, housing every function of the operation that was taking man to the stars, trying to get the race of man there before the aliens beat them to it. The lift shaft took Parmay and his wife up to the top level, where the apartments and restaurants were. There, they could look out through the broad windows at the rolling meadows and forest that covered the city beneath.

They sat down in a booth in the main dining room and dialed a menu.

"Now, bub," said Alina impatiently, "do I have to wait for food, or do you talk now?"

"I talk now. Do you know the present Chief of Psychological Contact?"

Alina lifted an eyebrow. "No. I never even heard of the department. What is it? Top secret, or something?"

"Not particularly. I'm it."

"That's nice."

Parmay looked at the tips of his fingers. "Nice? Oh, yes. And on the same scale, S Doradus is a comfortable warm star."

"Oh?" Alina lifted both eyebrows this time. "Why did they fire you from your old job? Did you fluff up?"

Parmay glowered. "Do you want to listen to me or not? If you're bored, you can quit paying attention."

Alina's laughter broke out into the open. "But you'll go on talking just the same!"

Parmay's laughter joined hers. "All right, vixen, go ahead and use your psychological torture methods. Just be glad that I don't use some of the refinements on you. If I were a research man instead of an engineer, I'd probably use you as a project."

"Brute! Shut up and eat!"

Through the meal, Parmay explained the new job.

"—so I'll have to pick a good crew to do the job right," he finished.

"You sound as though you're glad to be rid of the old position. Why?" Alina asked, offering a cigarette.

Parmay dragged it into light before answering.

"In a way, I am. I'm tired of telling new colonists bad news. I'm sick of feeding Ancestors half-truths. How would you like to tell a hundred thousand people, over a span of eighty years, that things are terrible, and tell them in such a way that they will think things are fine?"

Alina frowned. "Is it as bad as all that? Just because we've left them behind? Weren't they prepared for that when they left? They should know that Earth would have changed in all that time, that we would be ahead of them. Why should they be so shocked to come out of the fitzgerald and find that it's so?"

Parmay shook his head. "It's not that, honey. I have to tell them just the opposite. Look—do you realize that I have to tell them that we are losing the race with the aliens?

"I have to tell them that we have invented hypersee vision transmission—and the aliens had it first. I have to tell them that we have had hypersee ships for seventy years and the aliens have had them for twice that long.

"I have to tell them that the aliens have made a great deal of progress, and that we have

lagged pitifully behind in copying them. Have we done anything on our own? No."

Alina closed her eyes. "God, what pessimism. Gimme 'nother cigarette; mine went out."

Parmay handed her a cigarette. "What do you mean: 'pessimism'? What *have* we done?"

His wife held up a hand and began counting off fingers.

"One: Increase in the standard of living. The five-hour work week.

"Two: If and when it comes to a pitched battle between us and the aliens, we have the ionic disruptor. I can guarantee that no known conductor can stand up against it. And—"

Parmay waved her down. "Cut. That's just another problem to hand to the Ancestors. We have increased our own personal comforts; what does that mean to a group of people who are hacking out a new civilization on some godforsaken planet a couple of hundred light years from home?

"And how do you know we're invincible? The ionic disruptor disintegrates all and any metals or alloys we know of. But isn't it possible that the aliens have some alloy we don't have?"

"You find me a non-conducting metal," Alina said positively, "and I'll admit that the disruptor might fail against it."

"I repeat, my dear, how do you know we're invincible?"

Alina lifted the eyebrow again, a habit that irritated Parmay because he couldn't do it. "I don't know that we're invincible, and you know it," she answered, ignoring syntax. "But I hardly think you can say we haven't done anything."

"You think not?" grinned Parmay. "Listen: 'We haven't done anything.' "

Alina said nothing; she just looked at him.

"You look," said Parmay, "as though you loved me."

"You act as though you were analyzing me. Put that slipdisc back in its case, chum; I'll not have you pulling psychostatistics on me."

Parmay spread both palms. "Look, ma, no analyzer. I'm innocent."

BOTH MAN and the aliens were spreading inexorably. Neither knew, or could know, the aim, intention, or location of the other. Each knew that the other was spreading. Each was determined that the other should not be ahead in claiming the galaxy.

And each was determined that his own race, and his alone, should rule the stars.

Neither, seemingly, knew much about the other. It had become a battle of technology; a battle in which man was lagging behind. The psych engineers who told the outpost stars that man was catching up to the aliens were propagandizing in their teeth.

The enemy was ahead; the enemy was too damned far ahead.

So man fought doggedly on, hanging by his teeth, making each day, each second, count.

The Psychontact Division built up month by month as Parmay worked to get the right men into the right positions.

Specifically, Psychontact had the job of co-ordinating the colonies into a working whole, thus hoping to insure that the whole would be greater—and stronger—than the sum of its parts.

"Colonies! C o l o n i e s !" blazed Parmay, one morning. "You'd think we were bacteriological cultures!"

"Well," answered Alina, "of course we aren't."

"Well of course we *are!*" Parmay snapped back. "We're trying to spread, disease-like, over the galaxy in order to counteract the effects of another type of organism which is trying to do the same."

Alina was putting some of his things into a travelcase, and she went right on shoving them in as she answered.

"Romm, why does the alien problem bother you? You're getting to be a fanatic on the subject, and it's not your problem at all. Why don't you let Xenology do its job and you do yours?"

Parmay grabbed the travelcase as Alina closed it. He smiled nonchalantly. "Honey chile, I am not a fanatic; I just have to have something to yell about. Relieves tension and all that. Remind me to give you a lesson some time."

"But—"

"Shaddup. Come here."

When Alina started asking too many questions, Parmay didn't require a complete detailed analysis of his wife to know that she was worried about him; and he didn't need to run a complete synthesis to know what to do.

Twenty minutes later, the phone chimed.

"Damn!" Parmay blistered. He kissed Alina once more, then answered.

Lon Tallen, commander of the HC-36, greeted him from the screen. "Romm, we've installed all your equipment; we'll leave in two hours, but

I'd like to have you aboard in about an hour. Can do?"

"Can. See you." Parmay cut off and grinned at Alina. "Hear that? A whole hour."

AN HOUR LATER, he was aboard the Thirty-six, checking the instruments he had had installed. But he was only checking them with half a mind; the other half was on something Alina had said.

Fanatic? Possibly. After living with a threat that hadn't materialized in fifty decades, most of the human race viewed the alien threat with apathy. A man worked to prevent their spread—or rather to increase the spread of genus Homo—but after all, nothing had happened so far, had it? *Peace in our time.*

The trouble was, it took a psych man to realize the effect that losing the race would have on the people of Earth, and the human beings that Earth had scattered to the stars. And the farther Man spread, the worse that shock would be.

Parmay knew what it would be like, and Parmay didn't like it.

So his wife called him a fanatic. Well, perhaps he was, but he still didn't intend to let the race down by letting the aliens get too far ahead. Somewhere in the seven hundred million cubic light years that Man owned there must be traces of the alien, and Parmay was going to find them if he could.

The Thirty-six lifted herself off Earth only a shade less than an hour after Romm Parmay came aboard. Once in free fall beyond the moon, her nose was aimed at the approximate area of her destination: D 38°40′, RA 17h-4m. Then, gently and easily, the Hypersee Ship-36 slid out of normal space-time.

Commander Tallen was watching a communicator screen when Parmay entered the Main Control Salon.

Parmay groaned in mock despair. "Every time I walk into a place where there's a communicator, somebody's got their eyes glued to it. Why?"

Tallen turned. "I like to watch Junior, here. He scares me."

The face of an alien squirmed nastily on the plate.

"Why watch him, then?"

"I guess I'm like the little boy who banged his head against the wall because it felt so good when he stopped."

"Really?"

Tallen laughed. "No, not really. I keep watching because I keep hoping I'll run across something that will

give me a clue about them. I know experts have tried and failed, but I like to think that they might have been too close to the trees to see the forest, if you know what I mean."

"I'm glad," said Parmay frankly, "that someone besides me worries about them."

"Smoke?" asked Tallen, holding out his case.

"Thanks, no."

Tallen took one himself, then: "I understand your wife is working with hypersee."

Parmay nodded.

"Did you ever ask her why we can't get a line on the aliens' location?"

"Sure. And I get the same answer I'd get if I'd asked you: 'I don't know.' Hypersee waves aren't directional. They seem to ignore normal space-time and the matter and energy in it. They probably aren't instantaneous, but they're so close to it that trying to measure their rate of propagation at ordinary interstellar distances is as futile as Galileo's experiment with the lanterns on the mountaintops. Or was that Torricelli? Anyway, we don't have any way of knowing where they are or how far away."

Tallen looked back at the alien on the screen. "Then Junior, here, might be on the other side of the galaxy, as far as we know?"

"Right. Or M-33 in Andromeda. Or it's possible that they died out a thousand years ago, having lived at some spot in the universe so remote that even the hypersee hasn't reached us till now."

Tallen looked incredulous. "Then why are we worrying, if the damned things might not be anywhere around? Just on the off chance that they *might* be?"

Parmay shook his head. "Not exactly. We don't know anything from a strictly physical point of view, true; but we have done some work on the psychological side. We know, for instance, that they have seen our faces and heard our voices, just as you and I can watch Junior. We know this from the basic reactions of sentient creatures to that type of stimulus. They are aware of our existence. That rules out their being too far.

"We've been working to get ahead of them for five hundred years. If they're on the other side of the galaxy, we have another five hundred years before we contact them; if they're in one of the nearer galaxies, it will be another two thousand years.

"But we'll contact them

eventually, and it had better be on even terms."

Tallen examined the glowing end of his cigarette as though he were appraising a piece of art. "Too bad there isn't a doppler in hypersee; if the drive could be located, it would make it easy." He looked up at Parmay. "Do you know why we take so long to get to Therbis? Because of the stops. Look here." He picked up a card from the desk. "I use a table of random numbers. Every time we pass a star whose number is in the schedule chosen, we have to stop to see if there is any modulated electromagnetic radiation in the system. If there is, we've found the enemy."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then we haven't found him. And I get tired of sitting for eight hours while the communications boys mess around looking for something that isn't there." He spread his hands. "That's life. We look all over the galaxy for vibrations we can locate but can't find, and we find all kinds of communications we can't locate. I think I'll stick my nose in my ear and blow my brains out."

Parmay grinned. "Do me a favor; wait till we get to Therbis. That colony is scarcely twenty years old, and they might be worried if their contacts with the rest of civilization go around splattering their cerebrum over the insides of their own ships."

SEVEN TIMES during the next few days, the HC-36 approached a star and listened for electromagnetic disturbances in space.

Seven times, they got nothing but normal static.

Then came Therbis.

Someone once defined eternity as the time required for everything to happen once. If you toss a coin enough times, it will eventually land on edge; if you shuffle a deck of cards enough times, they will eventually deal out in any predetermined order. And, by the inherently unprovable laws of probabilities, if you watch a glass of water long enough, all the high-velocity molecules will congregate in one place and boil off, leaving the remainder of the water frozen solid. You may have to wait some ten to the twentieth years, or it may happen tomorrow. But, however improbable, each of them *can* happen.

Take a spaceship. In order for one spaceship to spot another, via radar, they must be within a million or so miles

of each other and have low velocities relative to each other. An Earth vessel might never see another Earth vessel in space unless they had arranged it beforehand. And arranging things beforehand is stacking the deck, a reversal of normal entropy that only intelligent beings can bring about.

The Thirty-six approached the Therbis sun at something less than a thousand miles per second, the actual difference in velocity between that sun and Sol. Therbis itself was the fourth planet of the system; cold and bleak. It was somewhat bigger than Terra, with plenty of water and a high percentage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, so the greenhouse effect kept it warm enough for human beings to colonize the island chains that surrounded the equatorial belt.

The HC-36 was braking in when the odds-against coincidence happened. Near planet six, which just happened to be at its nearest approach to Therbis, a spaceship came into range of the instruments of the HC-36. At first it was thought to be a meteor; that was what the instruments were meant to look for, and that's what they expected.

But no meteor is a smooth prolate spheroid, like a football with smoothly rounded ends. And no Earth ship was ever shaped like that, either.

It was visible on the plates of the HC-36 only a few seconds—then it vanished.

Orders were already snapping over the robot control system as Parmay charged for the main salon. He had heard the alarm and came running.

Tallen was slapping his hands over switch plates with lightning movements of his wrists. "Alien ship!" he shouted. "As soon as our radar touched her, she hit hypersee. That was about thirty-five seconds before our own equipment registered the echo, so she's had better than a minute to arrange herself nicely to blast us!"

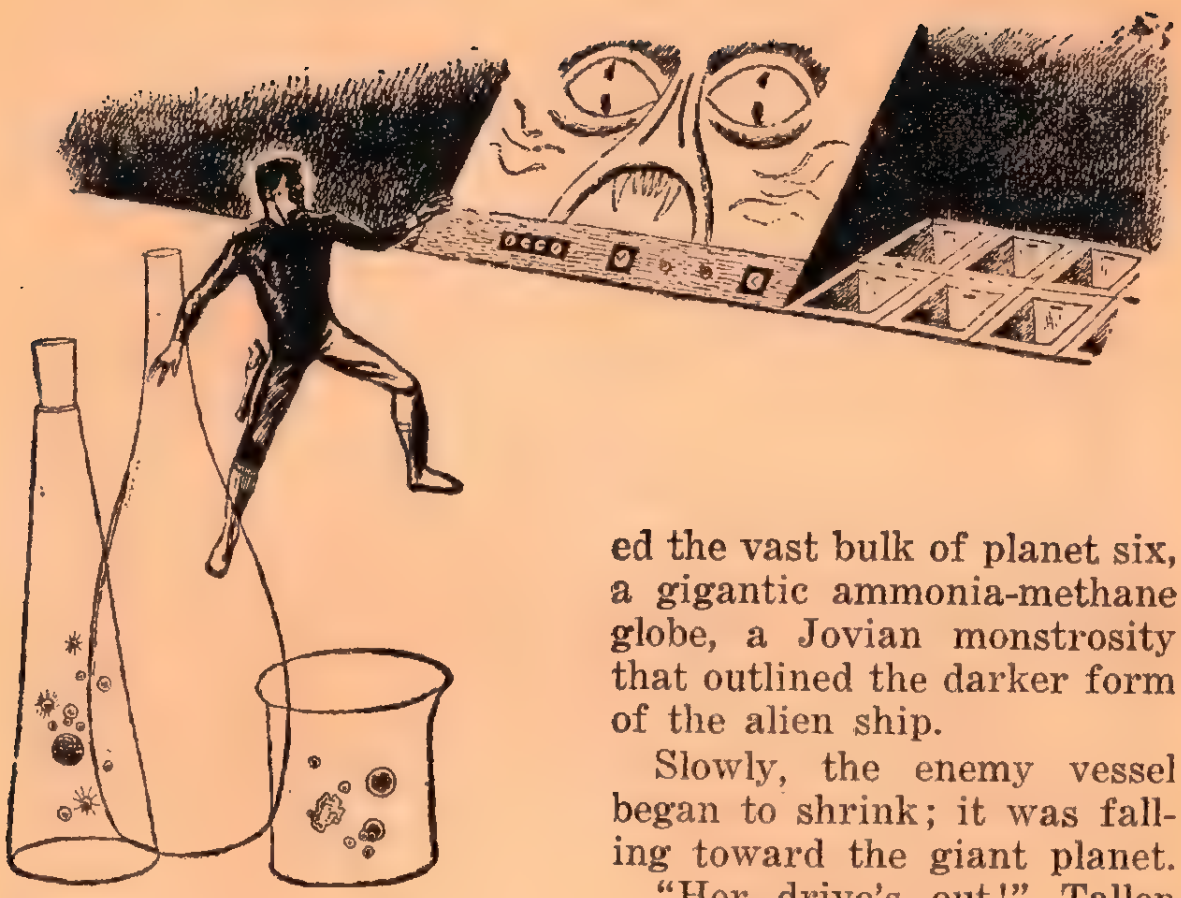
"Won't she have to come out of hypersee to do it?"

"Sure, but where?"

"I'd—"

He was cut off by a hum of power from Fire Control; at the same instant, he saw the football shape of the alien on the screen. It was less than eight miles away.

The Earthship's beam blazed momentarily on the alien vessel, then vanished. The alien dodged suddenly ahead, and something flick-



ered on her side. All hell broke loose in the Thirty-six. From the engine section came a faint thudding vibration of overload switches cutting out. The ship shivered and hiccoughed like a drink-deprived alcoholic.

Again Fire Control beamed out, and again the alien ship flared. But there was no answering blast.

Parmay, shaken, watched the weird battle on the screen. Behind the enemy ship loomed the vast bulk of planet six, a gigantic ammonia-methane globe, a Jovian monstrosity that outlined the darker form of the alien ship.

Slowly, the enemy vessel began to shrink; it was falling toward the giant planet.

"Her drive's out!" Tallen shouted gleefully.

"So is ours!" snapped a voice from the speaker above the panel.

"Are we falling?"

"No, it's the hypersee that's out. The planetary drive is perfect. The hypersee is burned all to hell. No breach in the hull."

"Get us orbited to Therbis," Tallen ordered. "What damage to the alien ship?"

Fire Control answered. "The ionic disruptor didn't do as much damage as we thought. We weakened their hull, but we didn't open it."

"Okay," Tallen said, "keep an eye on the 'scope. Compute the orbit of the ship and watch it. If it shifts off the computed fall path, we'll hit it again."

Parmay grabbed Tallen's shoulder.

"Did all this get on tape?"

"Sure. Why?"

Parmay pushed Tallen aside and headed for the communicator.

THE NEWS hit Earth like a slug in the teeth. For the second time in half a millenium the human race was brought face to face with the fact that it was not the only intelligence in the galaxy, much less in the whole universe.

The instant the news came, a fleet of armed ships was given its orders, and within six hours they were squirting through hyperspace toward Therbis.

Meanwhile, the Psychological Corps was in a dither. Parmay was shooting data to them from Therbis and asking, in return, for all kinds of seemingly irrelevant information. Chemists were asked questions about organic oxidation-reduction equations; physicists were asked for data on propagation of electromagnetic waves in distorted spaces and warped fields; biologists supplied facts about —of all things—deep sea fish.

All these things flowed into robot analyzers and synthesizers, came out and were fed back in again, directed by the frantic brain of Romm Parmay.

After twelve days, the bigwigs of Operation Interstellar were beginning to ask: "What in hell is Parmay driving at?"

And when Parmay was asked, all he would say was: "I'm not sure yet. I'm stranded here on Therbis until the fleet gets here, and I want to get back to Earth. I can't give you any answers 'til then."

Kerrman was on Earth, and he wasn't entirely unaware of what Parmay was working on. Kerrman, in fact, knew bloody well what it was. But he kept his mouth shut and applied a few ideas of his own.

Finally, word came that Parmay was on his way back from Therbis.

When he landed, the Directors of Earth were waiting for him, and two days later he was ready to appear before the assembled Directorate.

The fourteen Directors waited quietly for him to speak. The vast silence that filled the room seemed almost

a little too big for it, as though even a slight noise would not be heard if it were to be made. Pol Enson, the Speaker, looked at the others, then at Parmay.

"Okay, Romm; blaze away. I'm not a psych man, and I don't quite understand what you're driving at, but I hope you're right."

"I think I am," Parmay answered. "I've checked into it from every conceivable angle, and everything fits—there isn't one single unexplainable factor.

"We contacted the ship of the aliens. It went into hypersee. Then it attacked. Point one.

"Ask yourselves: *Why did it attack?* And then ask: *Why did* we *attack?*" He paused, watching them, then went on. *"Why didn't we both get the hell out of there?"*

The Directors frowned and waited.

"Keeping that in mind," Parmay continued, "let's look at our method of checking a system for the presence of aliens. We looked for modulated electromagnetics; we never found any. One explanation was that there weren't any aliens. But there's another explanation that fits the picture even better.

"They didn't put out any because they don't know anything about them in communication!"

The frowns of the Directorate became puzzled.

"Let's take another tack," Parmay went on. "Our ionic disruptors are supposed to turn any metal into an incandescent gas. But they hardly touched the enemy ship. Why? Because it was a nonconductor! Plastics, gentlemen, plastics strong enough to construct a spaceship hull of them. And that's even stronger than you think.

"But why plastics? Why not metal? That's another clue.

"Here, then, we have a race which does not use metal or the longer electromagnetic radiations—I have no doubt that they can use the shorter ones. And they attack another ship.

"Let's get back to that because it's important; it gave me my first clue. I wondered why they attacked. There could be no reason to attack a ship that might be better armed than you, even if your psychology is bred toward pure hate.

"There is only one good reason, and it is the same reason that made us fight back instead of running. We had a colony in that system,

and we didn't want the enemy to know it. If they had found us in a system where we had no colonies, we would have turned tail and run—the only sensible thing to do.

"But we didn't—and neither did they.

"Therefore, they, too, have a colony in that system!"

THE SPEAKER said: "Where? Therbis is the only planet with—" His voice trailed off as he suddenly saw the truth.

Parmay nodded. "All this time, we've been assuming that the aliens were after the same planets we were. But every bit of evidence indicates that they live on the ammonia-methane giants!"

He paused to light a cigarette, then went on: "Alina Starrnel, my wife, has done some checking on the conditions that obtain in such an atmosphere. Alina—" he nodded toward her.

She looked at them from her cool green eyes. "The atmospheres of ammonia-methane giants are such that the surface suffers from almost unbelievable electric storms. Every sunspot on the primary, every wind, every slight change in temperature causes lightnings and electrical displays such as we on Earth can't imagine. The atmosphere itself is a semi-conductor.

"Therefore, it would be almost impossible for them to have radio communication as we know it.

"There are two reasons why metals are not used for construction on such planets. One: the heavy, metal-bearing core of the giants is buried beneath thousands of miles of ice. Two: metals wouldn't stand the strain. At the temperatures prevailing on those planets, most metals are so brittle that they'd shatter under the loads that the unimaginable gravitational pull would cause.

"Plastics are a different matter. Any life that would evolve on such a world would be able to synthesize hard, tough materials in its own body. With plenty of carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen around, they would have to find some way of making building materials from organic compounds. Actually, they're probably not plastics as we know them; possibly they wouldn't even stand up at normal room temperature on Earth."

Parmay took up the story again. "There, you see, is the reason we never contacted them. We never went any-

where near such planets; we had no use for them. And they wouldn't try to colonize our planets any more than we'd try to colonize Mercury."

The Speaker had a question: "How did they detect your radar when it impinged on their ship?"

Alina answered him. "On their worlds, sound would be useless as a normal means of communication. There's too much noise. It would be like you or I trying to talk within fifty feet of an atomic bomb explosion. The shorter electromagnetic spectrum, bad as it is, would permit them to 'shout' at each other over a distance of a hundred yards, and they could probably carry on a normal conversation in a room this size.

"We believe that they are naturally equipped to speak to each other by radio—after all, an electric eel can generate currents within its own body of quite sizable voltages. A slight modification, plus a controling intelligence, could make a transmitter of a living body.

"Therefore, when our radar hit them, it probably sounded like a siren. They knew our ship was somewhere near and got the devil away from there."

The room was silent as Parmay thanked Alina and concluded his speech.

"So, we have no quarrel with the aliens; they have none with us. We have entirely different spheres of operation. There is no need for conflict between us, now, or ever. Our job now is to contact them as best we can and trade knowledge for—"

The door opened suddenly, and Kerrman stepped in. He walked over to Parmay and whispered softly for a moment.

Parmay turned back to the Directors. "Gentlemen, Dr. Kerrman has had scout ships watching for several days in places where the aliens might be assumed to be. It's paid off. Our calculations are perfectly correct."

He grinned widely. "We don't have to worry about feeling inferior; we have a lot of things they don't, and vice versa.

"For instance, we have Earth. And I don't know how close we may have come to their home base, but they have already colonized Jupiter!

"As a poet named Frost once said, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' We've got the best of all possible fences, so—let's get friendly with the neighbors, boys!" ∞ ∞

Had any bad nightmares lately? That's nothing; you'll be afraid to dream at all after you read . . .

traumerei

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

Illustrated by REMINGTON

AT THE sound, Henry Ritchie's hand jerked. Most of the martini sloshed out over his robe. He jumped up, swabbing furiously at the spots. "Goddam it!"

"Hank!" His wife slammed her book together.

"Well, what do you expect? That confounded buzzer—"

"—is a perfectly natural normal buzzer. You're just terribly upset, dear."

"No," Mr. Ritchie said, "I am *not* 'just terribly upset, dear'—for seven years I've been listening to that banshee's wail every time somebody wants in. Well, I'm through. Either it goes—"

"All right, all *right*," Mrs. Ritchie said. "You don't have to make a production out of it."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Mr. Ritchie sighed ponderously, glared at his wife, set what was left of the martini down on a table and went to the door. He slipped the chain.

"Be this the marster of 'arfway 'ouse?"

Mr. Ritchie opened the door. "Max—what the devil are you doing up at this hour?"

A large man, well built, in his forties, walked in, smiling. "I could ask you the same question," he said, flinging his hat and scarf in the direction of a chair, "but I'm far too thoughtful."

They went back into the living room. Mrs. Ritchie looked up, frowned. "Oh, swell," she said. "Dandy. All we need now is a bridge four."

"Ruth's just terribly upset," Mr. Ritchie said.

"Well," the large man said, "it's nice to see unanimity in this house for once anyway. Hi, Ruth." He walked over to the bar and found the martini mix and drained the jar's contents into a glass. Then he drained the glass.

"Hey, take it easy!"

Max Kaplan turned to face his hosts. He looked quite a bit older than usual: the grin wasn't boyish now. "Dear folkses," he said, "when I die, I don't want to see any full bottles around."

"Oh, ha-ha, that's just so very deliriously funny," Mrs. Ritchie said. She was massaging her temples.

"I am glad to see her ladyship amused." Kaplan followed Mr. Ritchie's gaze. "Hickory dickory dock, the mice looked at the clock. . . ."

"Oh, shut up."

"Oop, sorry." The big man mixed up a new batch silently, then refilled the three glasses. He sat down. The clock's tick, a deep sharp bass sound, got louder and louder in the room. Kaplan rested his head on the couch arm. "Less than an hour," he said. "Not even an hour—"

"I knew it." Mrs. Ritchie stood up. "I knew it the minute you walked in. We're not nervous enough, oh, no, now we've got to listen to the great city editor and his news behind the news."

"Very well!" Kaplan rose shakily. He was drunk; it showed now. "If I'm not welcome here, then I shall go elsewhere to breathe my last."

"Never mind," Mrs. Ritchie

said. "Sit down. I've had a stomach full of this wake. If you two insist on sitting up until X-hour like a couple of ghouls, well, that's your business. I'm going to bed. And to sleep."

"What a woman," Kaplan muttered, polishing off the martini. "Nerves of chilled steel."

Mrs. Ritchie looked at her husband for a moment. Then she said, "Good night, dear," and started for the door.

"See you in the morning," Mr. Ritchie said. "Get a good sleep."

Then Max Kaplan giggled. "Yeah, a real good sleep."

Mrs. Ritchie left the room.

THE BIG man fumbled for a cigarette. He glanced at the clock. "Hank, for Chrissake—"

Henry Ritchie sighed and slumped in the chair. "I tried, Max."

"Did you? Did you try— I mean with everything?"

"With everything. Might as well face it: the boy's going to burn, right on schedule."

Kaplan opened his mouth.

"Forget it. The governor isn't about to issue a commutation. With the public's blood up the way it is, he knows what it would mean to his vote. We were stupid even to try."

"Lousy vultures."

Ritchie shrugged. "They're hungry, Max. You forget, there hasn't been an execution in this state for over two years. They're hungry."

"So a poor dumb kid's got to fry alive in order for them to get their kicks. . . ."

"Wait a second now. Don't get carried away. This same poor dumb kid is the boy who killed George Sanderson in cold blood and then raped his wife, not too very long ago. If I recall, your word for him then was Brutal Murderer."

"That was the paper. This is you and me."

"Well, get that accusatory look off your face. Murder and rape—those are stiff raps to beat, pal."

"You did it with Beatty, you got him off," Kaplan reminded his friend.

"Luck. Public mood—Beatty was an old man, feeble. Look, Max—why don't you stop beating around the bush?"

"Okay," Kaplan said slowly. "They—let me in this afternoon; I talked with him again."

Ritchie nodded. "And?"

"Hank, I'm telling you—it gives me the creeps. I swear it does."

"What did he tell you?"

Kaplan puffed on his cigarette nervously, kept his eyes on the clock. "He was lying down when I went in, curled up tight. Trying to sleep."

"Go on."

"When he heard me, he came to. 'Mr. Kaplan,' he says, 'you've got to make them believe me, you've got to make them understand—' His eyes got real big then, and—Hank, I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Just him, maybe. I'm not sure."

"He carrying the same line?"

"Yeah. But worse this time, more intense somehow . . ."

Ritchie tried to keep the smile. He remembered, all right. Much too well. The whole story was crazy, normally enough to get the kid off with a life sentence in the criminally insane ward. But it was a little *too* crazy, so the psychiatrists wouldn't buy.

"Can't get his words out of my mind," Kaplan was saying. His eyes were closed. " 'Mister, tell them, tell them. If you kill me, then you'll all die. This whole world of yours will die. . . .' "

Because, Ritchie remembered, *you don't exist, any of you, except in my mind. Don't you see? I'm asleep and dreaming all this. You, your wives, your children, it's all part of my dream—and when you kill me then I'll wake up and that will be the end of you. . . .*

"Well," Ritchie said, "it's original."

Kaplan shook his head.

"Come on, Max, snap out of it. You act like you never listened to a lunatic before. People have been predicting the end of the world ever since Year 1."

"Sure, I know. You don't have to patronize me. It's just that—well, who *is* this particular lunatic anyway? We don't know any more about him than the day he was caught. Even the name we had to make up. Who is he, where'd he come from, what's his home?"

My home . . . a world of eternities, an eternity of worlds . . . I must destroy, hurt, kill before I wake always . . . and then once more I must sleep . . . always, always . . .

"Look, there's a hundred vagrants in every city. Just like our boy: no name, no friends, no relatives."

"Then he doesn't seem in the least odd to you, is that it? Is that what you're telling me?"

"So he's odd! I never met a murderer that wasn't!" Ritchie recalled the lean hairless face, the expressionless eyes, the slender youthful body that moved in strange hesitant jerks, the halting voice.

THE CLOCK bonged the quarter hour. Fifteen to twelve. Max Kaplan wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"And besides," Ritchie said, somewhat too loudly, "it's plain ridiculous. He says—what? We're a dream he's having, right? Okay—then what about our parents, and their parents, everybody who never heard of the kid?"

"First thing I thought of. And you know his answer."

Ritchie snorted.

"Well, think it over, for God's sake. He says *every* dream is a complete unit in itself. You—haven't you ever had nightmares about people you'd never seen before?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but—"

"All right, even though they were projections of your subconscious — or whatever the hell it's called—they were complete, weren't they? Going somewhere, doing something, all on their own?"

Ritchie was silent.

"Where were they going, what were they doing? See? The kid says every dream, even ours, builds its own whole world—complete, with a past and—as long as you stay asleep—a future."

"Nonsense! What about *us*, when *we* sleep and dream? Or is the period when we're unconscious the time *he's* up and around? And keep in mind that everybody doesn't sleep at the same time—"

"You're missing the point, Hank. I said it was complete, didn't I? And isn't sleeping part of the pattern?"

"Have another drink, Max. You're slipping."

"What will you wake up to?"

"My home. You would not understand."

"Then what?"

"Then I sleep again and dream another world."

"Why did you kill George Sanderson?"

"It is my eternal destiny to kill and suffer punishment."

"Why? Why?"

"In my world I committed a crime; it is the punishment of my world, this destiny . . ."

"Then try this on for size," Ritchie said. "That kid's frozen stiff with fear. Since

he's going to have to wake up no matter what, then why not sit back and enjoy it?"

Kaplan's eyes widened. "Hank, how soundly do you sleep?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I mean, do you ever dream?"

"Of course."

"Ever get hold of any particularly vivid ones? Falling down stairs like, being tortured, anything like that?"

Ritchie pulled at his drink.

"Sure you have." Kaplan gazed steadily at the clock. Almost midnight. "Then try to remember. In that kind of dream, isn't it true that the pleasure—or pain—you feel is almost as real as if you were actually experiencing it? I remember once I had a nightmare about my old man. He caught me in the basement with a cigarette—I was eight or nine, I guess. He took down my pants and started after me with his belt. Hank—that hurt, bad. It really hurt."

"So what's the point?"

"In my dream I tried to get away from my old man. He chased me all over that basement. Well, it's the same with the kid—except his dream is a hundred times more vivid, that's all. He knows he'll feel that electric chair, feel the jolts frying into him, feel the death boiling up in his throat just as much as if he were honest-to-God sitting there. . . ."

Kaplan stopped talking. The two men sat quietly watching the clock's invisible progress. Then Ritchie leaped up and stalked over to the bar again. "Doggone you, Max," he called. "You're getting *me* fidgety now."

"Don't kid me," Kaplan said. "You've been fidgety on your own for quite a while. I don't know how you ever made the grade as a criminal lawyer—you don't know the first thing about lying."

Ritchie didn't answer. He poured the drink slowly.

"Look at you and Ruth, screaming at each other. And then there was the other tip-off. The way you defended the kid—brilliantly, masterfully. You'd never have done that for a common open-and-shut little killer."

"Max," Ritchie said, "you're nuts. Tell you what: at exactly 12:01 I'll take you out for the biggest, juiciest, rarest steak you ever saw. On me. Then we'll get loaded and fall all over ourselves laughing—"

Ritchie fought away the sudden picture of steak, rare steak, with the blood sputter-

ing out, sizzling on an electric stove.

The clock began to strike. Henry Ritchie and Max Kaplan stood very still.

HE UNCOILED. The dry pop of hardened joints jabbed wakefulness into him until finally the twenty-foot long shell lay straight upon the steaming rocks. He opened his eyes, all of them, one by one.

Across the bubbling pools, far away, past the white stone geysers, he could see them coming. Many of them, swiftly, giant slithering things with many arms and many legs.

He tried to move, but rock grew over him and he could not move. By looking around he could see the cliff's edge, and he remembered the thousand bottomless pits below. Gradually the rest formed, and he remembered all.

He turned to the largest creature. "Did you tell them?" He knew this would be a horrible punishment, worse than the last, the burning, far worse. Fingers began to unhinge the thick shell, peel it from him, leaving the viscous white tenderness bare to the heat and pain. "Tell them, make them understand, this is only a dream I'm having—"

They took the prisoner to the precipice, lingered a moment to give him a view of the dizziness and the sucking things far below. Then nervous hands pressed him forward into space.

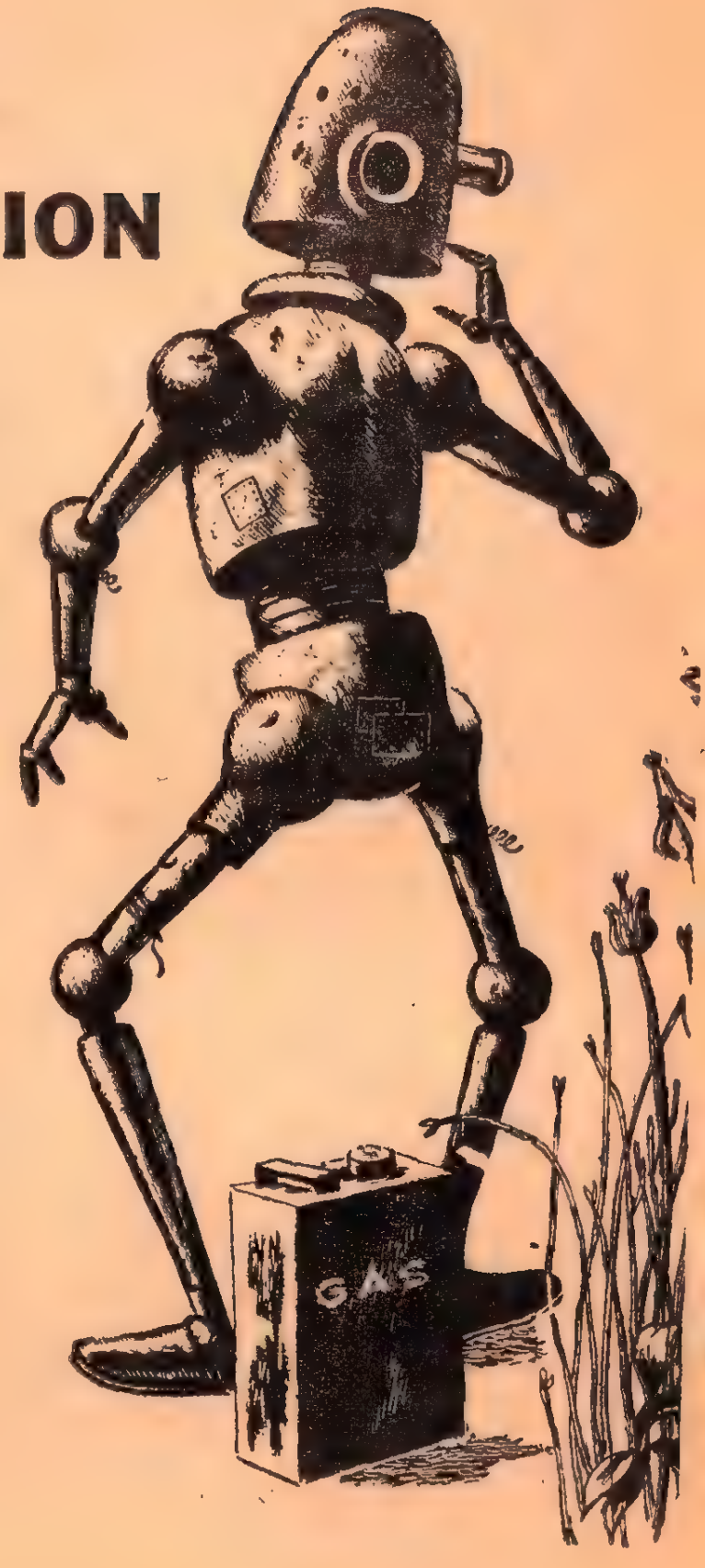
He did not wake for a long time.

∞ ∞ ∞

REBUTTAL! "The Star" by Arthur C. Clarke, published in the first issue of INFINITY, has proven one of the most popular and controversial science-fiction stories ever written. The right to anthologize it is being bid for enthusiastically by several editors, at this writing, and it's being talked about by readers everywhere. But every controversy has two sides, and the other side of the question raised by Clarke will be presented in another splendid story in our next issue. For the fascinating reply to the problem that plagued Clarke's Father Burt, read "Rebuttal" by Betsy Curtis, in the April issue of INFINITY. Along with "The Star," it will be remembered as an event of epic proportions in the science-fiction world.

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP



The old MacDonald mansion was a sort of robotic Cannery Row —until the can went to the gasoline pump too often!

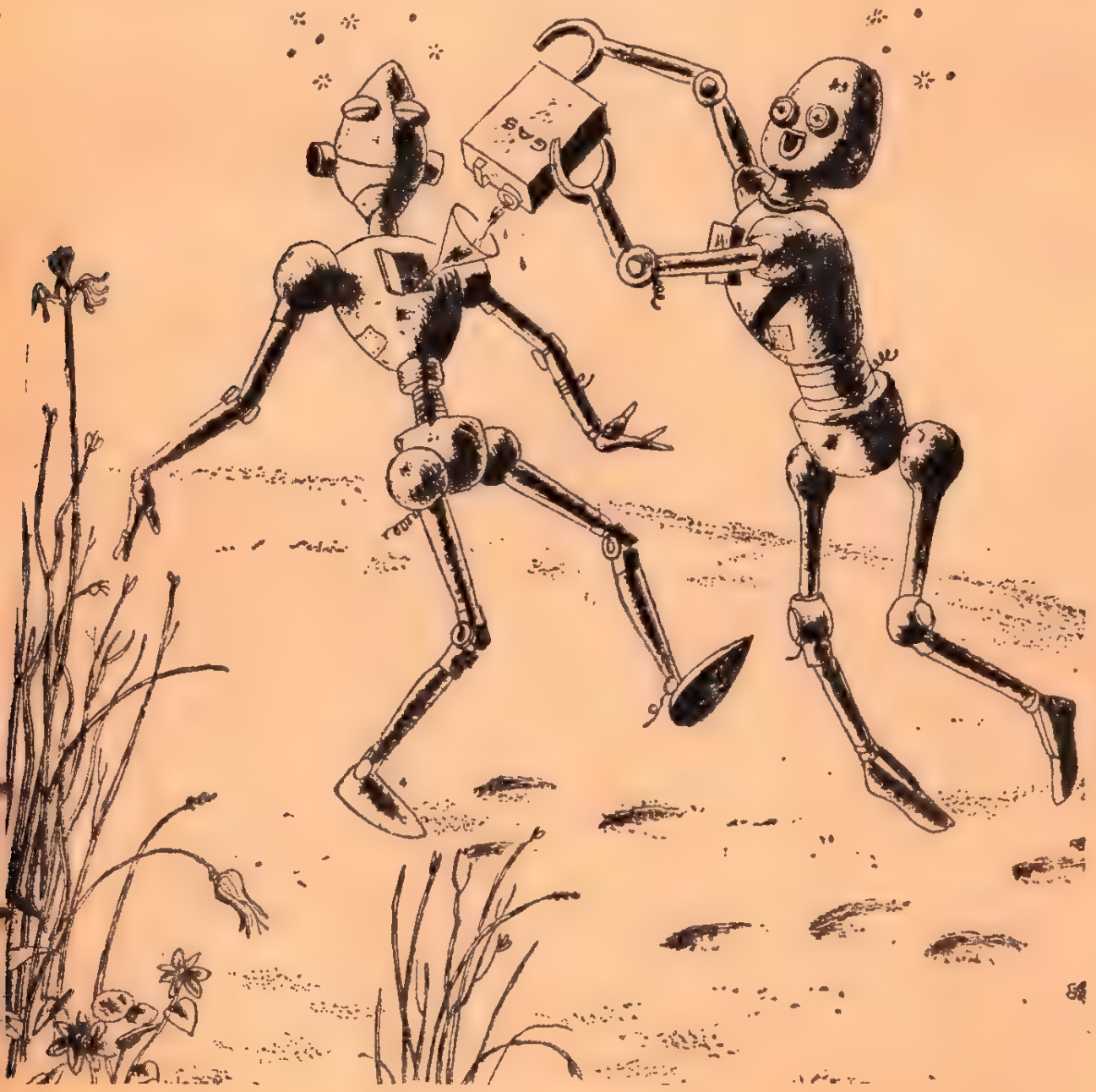
Illustrated by ENGLE

NAPOLEON raised the limp cadaver by one claw, looked at it with his remaining eye, and said: "Hercules, you forgot how heavy your fist is and how fragile the crania of these organisms are. This one is damaged beyond repair."

"Gee, I'm sorry, boss," said Hercules. "I only wanted to stop him from running away, like you told me to yourself."

"Faithful fellow! I doubt if this itinerant mendicant would have proved a satisfactory puppet in any case. His character was too firmly set in patterns of dissipation and irresponsibility. Conceal the remains in the cellar until nightfall; then inter them."

"Okay, boss," said Hercules.



He clanked out of the library with the body under one arm. The MacDonald mansion had few furnishings left: a few broken-down chairs, a few tattered books on the shelves of the library. On the walls appeared rectangles of different colors from the rest, where pictures had hung before the MacDonald heirs had finally stripped the house.

"What now?" asked Confucius. The other two liquid-fuel robots, Galahad and Sancho Panza, leaned forward attentively but did not speak. Sancho Panza could not because his vocalizer was broken and he had never been able to save enough money to have it replaced.

"I do not know yet," said Napoleon, settling his black drum-shaped body back on its three good legs.

The floor creaked but held under the nuclear robot's two-thousand-pound weight. It held because the cellar did not extend under the library, which rested on a thick concrete slab in turn supported by the sands of Coquina Beach. Fear of falling through the rotting floor and the malfunction of one leg had confined Napoleon to the library for years. Being nuclear-powered, he did not have to forage for fuel as did the other derelict robots dwelling in the ghost-mansion. Before he had been discarded, Napoleon had the usual robotic inhibitions against hostile acts towards men. But hard radiations, escaping from the thick shielding around his pile and transpiercing his brain, had broken these down.

The mansion had been built a half-century before by William Bancroft MacDonald, the newspaper magnate. MacDonald had made his fortune by teaching his readers to hate and fear Latin-Americans and Canadians. His descendants occupied the mansion until his grandchildren gave up the struggle against termites, damp-rot, and the high cost of running a big house. So the robums, worn-out emancipated robots, squatted in the ruin without hindrance.

"I must think," said Napoleon. "Always have a plan; leave nothing to chance."

"Your last plan wasn't so good," said Galahad.

"I could not foresee that this itinerant mendicant would prove both alcoholic and moronic. I offered him everything these organic people want: honor, glory, and riches. Had he evinced a willingness to follow my orders, I should have trained him, entered him in politics, and rais-

ed him to the leadership of this nation if not of the world. Yet so terrified was he that he sought escape."

"Gosh," said Confucius. "Just think; all the kerosene we want and a good gasoline binge whenever we feel like it!"

"What was that idea about a kid, boss?" said Galahad.

"It is a more hazardous plan, but it offers greater possibilities. By rearing the organism from childhood we can more readily train it in the direction we wish it to go. The problem is: what child?"

Galahad said: "Homer knows a kid. The Sanborn kid, four houses north of here."

"Ah?" said Napoleon. "Perchance the hand of destiny offers a second opportunity. Tell me about this 'kid'."

HOMER walked north along Coquina Beach. The bright sun stood high over palms and cypresses. The waves of the Gulf broke heavily on the sand, each wave leaving scores of shiny little coquina-clams, no two with the same color-scheme: white, ivory, butter-yellow, red, blue, and purple. Before the next wave arrived, each coquina up-ended and burrowed out of sight.

Homer was looking for shells. Not just any shells, like those that crunched under his metal feet with every step. He wanted rare shells that he could sell for money for kerosene to power him to hunt for more shells.

Most of the shells—conchs, strombs, scallops, oysters, clams, razor-clams, murices, and so forth—were worthless. Now and then, however, a beach-comber could find one like the double sunburst, which would keep Homer in kerosene for a fortnight. Once he had found a perfect junonia which kept all the robums going for a month and provided gasoline for an orgy as well. The angel-wing clam was rare on the beach, but Homer knew better than to pick up even a perfect one. Anybody who wanted angel-wings could dig hundreds out of the mud of tidal flats, where they lived buried with their tubes sticking up out of holes. They were rare on the beach only because they were so fragile that few were cast up undamaged.

Homer had a collecting-bag over his left shoulder. He kept it in place with his stiff left arm, of which the disabled elbow-joint had long since rusted fast. He picked up the shells with his good right. He moved slowly so as not to crush valuable shells or flick sand up into his joints.

His bearings were all ground loose anyway, but who would pay for relining them? As with most old pieces of machinery, Homer had passed the stage where organic people took any interest in repairing him. A new robot would be cheaper.

As Homer passed the Sanborn house, young Archibald Sanborn came out in pajamas, robe, and slippers, with hair awry and jowl unshaven.

"Hey, Homer!" said Archie Sanborn.

Homer straightened up, pointed at the sun, and said: "Wake! For the Sun, who scattered into flight/The Stars before him from the Field of Night,/Drives Night along with them from Heav'n, and strikes/The Sultàn's Turret with a Shaft of Light."

"I know it's late," growled Sanborn. "Will you do a job for me?"

"I know it's late," growled Sanborn. "Will you do a job for me?"

"A little work, a little play,/ To keep us going—and so, good-day! What kind of job, Mr. Sanborn?"

"I want you to walk up to Jake's service-station—"

"Foot — foot — foot — foot sloggin' over Florida—"

"And get me ten gallons of gasoline—"

"Gasoline, Mr. Sanborn?"

"Yes, gasoline, piston-engined automobile grade. Here's five bucks; keep the change."

"Are you going to take out one of your old cars?"

"I gotta. The wife's gone to Sarasota for lunch with a girlfriend, and I got a date with Doc Brauer in an hour. So I gotta use one of the antiques."

Archie Sanborn waved at his open five-car garage. The southernmost stall, normally filled by the Chrysler Thunderhorse, stood empty. The other places were occupied by Sanborn's old-car collection, from the 1967 Buick Beetle to the genuine Ford Model A of 1930.

The thing that really told the four old automobiles from the missing new one was that the former were piston-engined gasoline-burning machines, while the latter, like all modern cars, was driven by a little kerosene turbine in the rear. Gasoline had gone back to the status of a dangerous fluid used for taking spots out of cloths and powering the antique autos of those who collected them. Sanborn continued: "And I haven't got—"

"Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,/ That was built in such a logical way—"

"Shut up and get going! And don't start spouting poetry and forget what you're supposed to do."

Homer was about to go when another voice called: "Homer! Ho-o-omer!"

Homer saw Gordon Sanborn, three, beside his father, and said: "Child of pure unclouded brow/And dreaming eyes of wonder!/Though time be fleet—"

"I wanna go with you to Jake's," said Gordie.

"You can't," said Archie Sanborn.

"I wanna go with Homer!" cried Gordie. "He's my friend. You're not my friend."

Sanborn looked helplessly at Homer, saying: "I'd let him go, but I promised Roberta not to let him out of my sight until she got back."

"You're bad!" said Gordie, punching his father's leg. "Bang-bang, you're dead! I don't like you no more. I'm going with Homer. . . ."

Gordie's voice rose to a shriek as his father carried him into the house. Homer set off up the beach with a rattle of worn bearings. Out in the Gulf, fishing-smacks lazed up and down the coast, and gulls creaked and puled.

NAPOLEON put away the volume MUS to OZON of the encyclopedia in which he had been reading again of the life of his illustrious namesake. The MacDonald heirs abandoned the encyclopedia because it was old and battered and the volume CAST to COLE was missing, but the remaining volumes had provided Napoleon with reading-matter for years. To the robots who had entered he said: "Has the partition been erected?"

"Yeah," said Hercules. "It didn't fit the first time, but we fixed it."

"That, then, is where we shall conceal the child."

"If we get a child," said Galahad. "You think it's easy to snatch a brat and tuck it away in the attic. But organic people are fussy as hell about their young. They'll turn Coquina Beach upside down looking for it."

"Yeah," said Hercules. "You'll get us scrapped yet, Nappy."

"You are behaving like irrational and timorous organic people," said Napoleon. "You must learn to trust my star. Had it not been for the plans evolved by my superior brain to procure you fuel, you would all have ended your careers on the scrap-heap long ago. Now go, my brave soldiers, and fetch me a child. Lure it

by promises and blandishments; no force."

A HALF-HOUR later, Homer was on his way back towards the Sanborn house from Jake's service-station. Four pelicans flapped overhead in column. Homer met Galahad and Confucius. Galahad said:

"Whatcha got in those cans, Homer?"

"Gasoline."

"Gasoline!" exclaimed Galahad and Confucius together. "What for?"

"Mr. Sanborn hired me to get it for his old cars."

"Wicked waste," said Confucius, "makes woeful want. Using that precious stuff on brainless old machines, when we could have an orgy on it."

"Well, that's what he hired me for," said Homer.

"You couldn't give us a little swig?" said Confucius.

"No."

"Lives there a man who hath gasoline, and giveth his neighbor none," said Confucius, "he shan't have any of my gasoline when his gasoline is gone."

Homer said: "If I start doing that, Mr. Sanborn won't give me any more jobs."

Galahad said: "Anyway, there's no hurry. Let's sit down in the shade and cool our bearings."

"Okay," said Homer.

They found a place at the base of a clump of palms, back from the beach. Homer kicked aside a dead horseshoe crab and asked: "What are you guys doing?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies; give me some apples and I'll bake you some pie," said Confucius.

"Just a little job for Nap," said Galahad. "We'll tell you about it when it's done. What's Sanborn doing with his old cars?"

"Driving one of them to Doc Brauer's," said Homer.

"That little distance?" said Galahad. "It's less than a mile. That shows you how feeble organic people are."

"I know," said Homer. "It doesn't do to tell them so, though, or they won't hire you."

"This Brauer," said Confucius. "He's a kind of mechanic for organic people's brains, isn't he?"

"Yeah," said Galahad. "He talks about how organic people need love and appreciation to run efficiently. Nobody ever thinks a robot might like a little love and appreciation too."

"They say we're just machines," said Confucius.

"Yeah," said Galahad. "They're just machines too, and the smart ones know it."

Confucius said: "They talk about souls, but that's just a lie to kid themselves they're more than machines."

"Well, they do have brains," said Homer.

"So do we," said Galahad. "They're machines with brains; we're machines with brains; the automobiles are machines without brains. That's the real difference, not whether we're made of metal or meat."

Confucius said: "Brain is brain, whether made of neurons or microtransistors. They found that to make us adaptable enough to serve them, they had to give us brains of the same habit-forming and reflex-conditioned kind as their own. Then they act surprised when we have wants and feelings too."

"Or poetical talents like Homer here," said Galahad.

"That was an accident," said Homer. "I told you how they put in a recording of a poetic anthology with the others when I was being indoctrinated."

"Why don't you sell your poetry?" said Galahad. "Some organic people make money that way."

"I did have a poem published in an advance-guard magazine," said Homer, "but they never paid me the five bucks they promised. And a robot can't sue, even if the amount had been enough to make it worthwhile."

"Have you tried any other magazines?" asked Galahad.

"Yes, but they said my stuff was too derivative. My brain can remember other people's poems all right, but it's not original enough to compose good verse."

"That shows you how mean they are," said Galahad. "They give a robot enough intelligence to make him appreciate poetry but not quite enough to make his own. And when we get old and our bearings are worn down, they throw us out and tell us we're lucky not to be scrapped. We might as well disfunctionalize ourselves."

Homer quoted: "Guns aren't lawful;/Nooses give;/Gas smells awful;/You might as well live."

"Oh, I'll live," said Galahad. "There's always a chance of a good jolt of gasoline."

"Speaking of which," said Confucius, "it wouldn't hurt to give us a swig of yours. You can tell Sanborn Jake cheated him."

"I don't know," said Homer. "You guys may have lost your inhibitions towards organic people, but I've still got most of mine. And that would make trouble among them."

"Well, tell him the stuff evaporated in the sun," said Galahad. "Who do you owe the most to, a lousy meat-man or one of your own metal and fluid?"

"Just a little swallow," said Confucius. "Didn't we walk miles to fetch fuel to you when you ran out? The laborer is worthy of his hire."

"Well, all right," said Homer, "but only a little. Open up."

Galahad and Confucius each opened the door in his chest and dragged out a funnel attached to the end of a flexible metal tube. Homer unscrewed the cap of one gasoline-can and poured a splash into Galahad's funnel. He replaced the cap, opened the other can, and did likewise with Confucius.

"Ah-h, I feel better already," said Galahad, slamming the door in his chest. "That sure gingers you up."

"Be careful," said Homer, "or it'll dissolve your lubrication away."

"Poor Homer," said Confucius, "always worrying. I've been running on dry bearings so long I don't know what a good lube-job feels like. Another shot would feel good, too."

"I told you—" said Homer.

"Look at it this way," said Galahad. "What will Sanborn do with this gasoline? Put it in one of those unsafe old contraptions and go for a drive. And what's the leading cause of death among organic people? Automobile accidents."

"We'd be contributing directly to his death," said Confucius. "It would be healthier for him to walk anyway."

"You'd be doing him a favor not to deliver it for him to put in one of those risky old cars. You don't want to be responsible for disfunctionalizing him, do you?"

"No, but—" said Homer

In the end Homer gave Galahad and Confucius their additional shots of gasoline. Galahad said: "You've got to have some too, Homer."

"No. That's one thing I won't do."

"Sure you will. You don't want to be the only sober one in the party, do you?"

"But—"

"And it'll hurt our feelings. Make us feel you look down on us as a couple of old robums. You wouldn't do that, would you? To your best friends?"

Homer's loudspeaker gave an electronic sigh as he opened his chest. "You guys will be the disfunction of me yet," he said, pouring. "Say, that's a good grade of stuff."

"High octane rating," said Confucius.

AS ELEVEN o'clock neared, Archibald Sanborn stepped out on the beach to see if Homer was coming. The sunlight poured down in a white flood and bounced blindingly from beach and wave. A frigate-bird squealed overhead. As Homer was back under the trees with Galahad and Confucius, the beach appeared empty save for a couple of bathers. Sanborn angrily went back into his house and telephoned Doctor Brauer.

"Doc," he said, "I don't see how I can keep my date with you. I'm awfully sorry and it's not really my fault."

"What's the matter?"

"It's that damned old robum, Homer." Sanborn told of the errand for the gasoline.

"Well, couldn't you walk?" said Brauer.

"Walk?" said Sanborn in a shocked voice. Then another thought occurred to him. "I'd have to bring the kid, and it would take all day."

"Then stay where you are; I'll drive over. It'll only take a couple of minutes."

HOMER, unsteadily pouring gasoline into his funnel, said: "Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before/I swore—but was I sober when I swore?/And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand/My threadbare Penitence apieces tore. I've got to go after this shot, boys, no fooling."

Galahad said: "You know what we ought to do with this gasoline?"

"What?"

"If we really want to do young Sanborn good, we won't give him any. Even a drop is dangerous in the hands of an organic man."

"They don't carry it in their hands; they put it in the fuel-tanks of their cars," said Homer.

"Don't be an old pedant," said Galahad. "You know what I mean. If we took these cans home, we could have the finest orgy in years."

"Get behind me, Satan," said Homer. "I won't hear of it."

ARCHIBALD SANBORN lay on his own couch and talked to Doctor Brauer.

". . . so you see I'm a poor little rich boy; only I'm not really rich. I have enough income so I can always eat, though not enough for yachts and stuff. So I can't argue that I've got to work to keep from starving. At the same time I haven't enough brains to make a real splash in anything—you know—creative, like writing or art. I never finished prep-school, let alone college.

So what can I do? My only real talent is tinkering; all my brains are in my fingers. But if I take a job in a garage, like I did last year, Roberta says it's ridiculous and undignified 'for a man in my position.' Then she comes down here to our winter place and tells me I'd better come along, or else. So I have to quit my job, and you can't get anywhere at that rate. Anyway I'm too lazy to be a success even at mechanical work, not having to worry about my next meal."

Doctor Brauer said: "Lots of people wish they could live a life like yours. Why not relax and enjoy it?"

Sanborn twisted his face. "It's not so simple. My father was a big man who made a success at several things, and it makes me feel guilty not to be like him. Roberta's father's a pretty important guy too and keeps needling me about 'making something of myself.' Even Roberta does it, when she's not stopping me from doing any real work by dragging me away to resorts. And I agree with 'em; I'm a lazy no-good bum. I don't want to be a bum, only I don't know how to stop. It's driving me nuts. I try to use my poor little ability on this hobby of old cars, but Roberta makes a fuss about even that. If we

didn't have 'em, she says, we could afford a 'plane and a robot maid and a trip to Europe. So everybody's pulling me in a different direction. I'm wasting my life. . . ."

Gordon Sanborn, strewing the floor of the next room with blocks and other toys, paid no attention to this adult talk. Presently, tiring of blocks, he toddled out of the house. His father had ordered him, on pain of dire penalties, to stay where he was, but Gordie never remembered commands longer than thirty seconds.

He trotted south along the beach until he met Hercules. Hercules had walked two miles south from the MacDonald mansion without seeing any stealable infants and was now returning to his master.

"Hello," said Hercules. "Aren't you the Sanborn kid?"

"Yes, my name is Gordon Boulanger Sanborn," said Gordie. "You're a robot but you're not Homer. Homer's my friend. Who are you?"

"I'm Hercules. Would you like to see Homer?"

"Sure. Where is he? That's a funny name, Hercules. Where is Homer? Has he gone away?"

"He's home sick and he'd like to see you."

"Okay, take me to see Homer. I like Homer. I don't like you. Bang-bang, you're dead. Some day I may like you, but not now."

Hercules led Gordie, chattering cheerfully, to the MacDonald grounds. They walked up a path flanked by man-high weeds and young trees that had seeded in any old way. Hercules brought the child in to Napoleon. Napoleon put away MUS to OZON and fixed his eye on Gordie.

"You're not Homer," said Gordie. "I don't like you either. Homer has two legs, but you have four. Why have you got four legs?"

"Because I am heavier than the liquid-fuel robots," said Napoleon.

"What happened to your other eye? It looks funny."

"I am Napoleon. Never mind my other eye."

"Why not?"

"You have been brought here to fulfill my destiny."

"What's a destiny? How do you fill it?"

"I have a splendid fate in store for you. By following my star—"

"Where's Homer?"

"Never mind Homer. He will return when he returns."

"Why?" said Gordie.

"You will attain the hegemony of the world of organic men—"

"Who is Jiminy?"

"And through you we robots shall be freed from bondage and serfdom—"

"Where's Homer?"

"I do not know. As I was saying—"

"Hercules said he was sick. I want Homer."

"Listen, Gordon, I am telling you some very important things—"

"I want Homer!" Gordie began to stamp and shriek. "I don't like you. You're bad."

"Homer is out on the sand. He is not seriously indisposed and will soon return. Now—"

"You're not my friend. Homer is my friend. I want him."

"Look at me, Gordon, and listen." Napoleon began blinking the light of the scanner in his eye on and off in a hypnotic rhythm. "How would you like to live with Homer and the rest of us?"

"Okay. But I want Homer now. Go get him, you bad old robot!"

"I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because one of my legs fails to function."

"What's function?"

"It does not work."

"Why doesn't it?"

"Understand, Gordon, that from henceforth this shall be your family. I shall take your father's place—"

"Okay, I don't like Daddy anyhow. But I want Homer. Go get him or I'll kick you."

"Keep quiet and pay attention. You shall live with us as your new family."

"Why?"

"You must not leave this house, and when anti-social individuals—I mean bad men—come here, you must let us hide you from them—"

"Where's Homer? I want my lunch."

There was a grating sound from Napoleon's loudspeaker. If he had been human, one would have said he was grinding his teeth. As he had none, the sound must be blamed on a malfunction of his vocalizer. This in turn was caused by the overheating of certain circuits in his brain. The overheating was caused by the strain of trying to carry on a serious conversation with Gordon Sanborn. Robots do not lose their tempers, but when their cerebral circuits get overheated the result is much the same.

"Please listen, Gordon," said Napoleon. "You will be the greatest man in the world—"

"Bang-bang, you're dead," said Gordie. "Bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang."

"Grwowkh!" roared Napoleon. "Hercules!"

Hercules came in. "Yes, boss?"

"What ails you?" said Napoleon. "You are walking unsteadily."

"We're having a swell binge. Homer and Galahad and Confucius just came in with two five-gallon cans of gasoline."

"Well, forget the orgy and take this organism to his oubliette before he burns out my cerebral circuits."

"I wanna see Homer!" said Gordie.

Hercules led the boy out. Gordie called: "Hey, Homer! Here I am!"

"What are you doing here, Gordie?" said Homer. "What are you doing with him, Hercules?"

"Shut up, Homer," said Galahad. "This is Nappy's great scheme."

"I don't know about that."

"You mind your business and everything will be all right," said Galahad. "Gordie, you go along with Hercules. Homer will visit you later."

"No, I wanna visit now. Bang-bang, bang-bang . . ." Hercules bore Gordie, protesting angrily, up the stairs. Homer started uncertainly after them, but then let himself be pulled back into the party.

HERCULES had hardly returned from stowing Gordie when Sancho Panza began beating his chest to attract attention and pointing.

"Cops," said Hercules, looking out the window. He strode to the door of the library and jerked it open. "Hey, boss!"

"Why are you breaking into my train of thought?" said Napoleon.

"The gendarmes. Probably looking for the kid."

"Well, show them about, everything but the oubliette. It would be expedient to conceal those cans of gasoline first, though. Organic people think we are incompetent to manipulate the fluid."

"How about that stiff in the cellar?"

"Oh. I had forgotten. Show them upstairs first. While they are up, have the others take the corpse out and cover it. Make it inconspicuous."

The rusty knocker clanked. Hercules hurried out to give orders. Homer and Galahad disappeared into the cellar while Hercules opened the warped front door to admit two patrolmen of the Coquina Beach police. The senior of these said: "Mr. Sanborn says his kid's disappeared. You-all know anything 'bout it?"

"Not a thing, suh," said Hercules. "If you'd like to look

our little old house over, I'll be glad to show you round."

"Reckon we better take a look," said the policeman. "What's on this floor?"

Hercules led the policemen into the library. Napoleon raised his scanner-beam and said: "Greetings, gentlemen. Can I be of assistance?"

The policemen repeated their statement. Hercules showed them over the ground floor, then the second floor. Then he took them up the narrow stair that led to the main part of the attic. They glanced around but paid no special heed to the partition that blocked off Gordie's section.

When Hercules brought the policemen down to the cellar, the corpse of the tramp was no longer there. The policemen asked the robots to keep an eye out for Gordon Sanborn and departed.

"Thank Capek for that!" said Galahad. "They had me worried."

Hercules said: "What did you do with the meat?"

"You know that rotten old canvas tarpaulin the people used as a drop-cloth for painting? It's wrapped in that, out against the greenhouse."

"Let's get back to the orgy," said Hercules. "I sure earned a shot of gasoline."

Confucius dragged out the cans and poured a generous slug into everybody's funnel.

"Whee!" said Hercules. "Bring on your nine labors—or was it twelve? Anyway there was a lion in it. I could strangle a lion too, just like he did."

"It was Sampson strangled the lion," said Homer.

"Maybe they both did," said Hercules. "Yeow! Where's some iron bars for me to bend?"

Homer said: "Ay, this is the famous rock, which Hercules/And Goth and Moor bequeathed us. At this door/England stands sentry. . . ."

"Let's sing," said Galahad. "The elephant is a funny bloke;/He very, very seldom takes . . ."

"Confucius say," said Confucius, "This loathsome worm will gratefully receive additional portion of gasoline, honorable Hercules."

"Can the fake Chinese dialect and pour your own, Ironhead. You were made in Dayton just like I was. I've got to dance. Yippee!" Hercules began hopping up and down the hall, making the mansion's rotting timbers quiver. Sancho Panza drummed with his knuckles on his metal chest to make rhythm.

The party got noisier until nobody could hear anybody

even with loudspeakers at greatest amplitude. Homer, finding that no attention was paid to his recitations, left off in the middle of *Horatius at the Bridge* and went into the library.

"Shut that door!" said Napoleon. "How is a leader to work out his destiny with that fiendish racket going on?"

"It got too loud for me," said Homer. "Galahad and Confucius are trying to wrestle, with Hercules umpiring. They'll break something sure. Else in a giant's grasp until the end/A hopeless wrestler shall thy soul contend."

"As if they did not have enough mechanical defects already," said Napoleon. "A fine lot of soldiers I am cursed with. Sit down and read a book or something. I think."

"An excuse for loafing," said Homer. "I feel like reciting, so you'll have to hear me."

"You are intoxicated."

"Not so drunk as they are, but drunk enough to defy your orders."

"Shut up or get out!"

"To the junk-pile with you, Nappy. Did you know a man once translated Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* into German? He made some mistakes, but it's still fun. *Es brillig war. Die schlichte Toven/ Wirrten und wimmelten in Waben;/Und aller-mümsige Burggoven/Die mohmen Räth' ausgraben./Bewahre doch vor Jammerwoch—"*

Floomp! There was a muffled explosion. The noise of revelry stopped. There were cries in robotic voices and a clatter of robotic limbs.

Homer opened the door. The hall was full of smoke lit by the flickering light of a raging gasoline fire.

"Homer!" said Napoleon. "Help me out, quickly. Put your hands under the hip-joint of my left front leg, this one, and lift. I can move the others enough—"

"But the boy? In the attic?" said Homer.

"Oh, never mind him! He is only meat."

"But I must save him."

"After you have saved me. I am your leader."

"But he's my friend." Homer strode to the door.

"Come back, dolt!" said Napoleon. "He will do nothing for you, whereas I shall make you one of the hidden masters of the world. . . ."

HOMER looked about the blazing hall. All four robots lay in contorted attitudes. Sancho Panza was still trying to crawl, but the heat had melted the insulation of the

others' wiring. Galahad's fuel-tank blew up, squirting burning liquid from every joint and seam in the robot's body.

Homer sprinted up the stairs, found the ladder, opened the trapdoor into Gordie's section of the attic, and stuck his head through. Gordie lay on the floor asleep. Homer reached for him, could not quite get a grip on him, but poked him with his fingertips.

"Wake up, Gordie," he said.

Gordie yawned and sat up. "Who is this? Oh, goody, Homer! I like you. Where have you been?"

"Come here."

"Why?"

"I'm going to take you home."

"But I don't want to go home. I like it here. What's that smell? Is somebody burning leaves?"

"There's a fire. Come quickly or I'll spank you."

"Bang-bang. Now you're dead and can't spank me."

Homer hoisted his body through the trap and lunged at Gordie. Gordie dodged, but Homers' right arm caught him and dragged him to the opening.

When Homer had carried Gordie down the ladder, Gordie said: "Oh, the house is burning up!" and tried to scramble back up the ladder. Homer pulled him down, whereupon he tried to hide under the bare bed-frame that stood against one wall of the room. Homer dragged Gordie out into the second-story hall. The smoke made the interior almost night-dark, and the stairwell was full of roaring fire.

Homer gave up thoughts of getting out that way. Had the house been furnished and had his left elbow not been stiff, he might have knotted bedsheets.

As it was, he knocked out a window with his fist, hoisted a leg over the sill, and hauled Gordie into the crook of his right arm. Gordie shrieked and tried to grip the window-frame. Homer could see people running toward the mansion. The siren on the Coquina Beach firehouse wailed.

Flames raced along the second-story hall. Homer held Gordie so that his body shielded the child from the heat. He felt the insulation going on the wiring on his exposed side. Gordie was crying and coughing in spasms.

Homer jumped. He tried to cushion the shock of landing for the boy. A cable snapped in his right leg and he fell, dropping Gordie. Archibald Sanborn ran forward, picked

up his child, and ran back. Roberta Sanborn gathered the still-coughing Gordie into her arms with hysterical endearments. Other people closed in around the Sanborns, pushing, talking excitedly.

Nobody bothered with Homer. Something burning fell on him. With his good arm and leg he crawled away from the house. He heard Roberta Sanborn say: "Those fiends had Gordie! They ought to all be scrapped!"

"We don't know what happened," said Archie Sanborn. "Homer seems to have saved the kid. What did happen, Homer?"

Homer's vocal circuits had been damaged. In a croaking whisper he said: "Double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn and cauldron . . ."

His remaining circuits went out. The dancing lights in his eyes died, and he was just a pile of metal waiting for the junkman.

The firemen took one look at the blazing mansion and began wetting down the neighboring trees and houses without even trying to save MacDonald's palace.

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Tales for Tomorrow

The next (April) issue of INFINITY will lead off with one of the finest bits of April Foolery you've ever seen in science fiction: "The Guests of Chance" by Charles Beaumont and Chad Oliver. To say too much about this side-splitter would be to spoil it for you, but just as a hint, one of the major characters is engaged in an earnest attempt to make the map of the United States more aesthetic in its appeal by lopping off all the ragged edges—like the New England states, for instance. Which isn't too surprising, when you consider that the Aesthetic Party is running the government and the country—and doing its darnedest to get kicked out of office. We guarantee that, after reading this story, you'll think twice before you next pull that voting lever.... There'll be serious and suspenseful stories, too, of course; in fact, there will always be a well-balanced variety of both lengths and types in INFINITY, written by the very best of old and new writers.

Glow Worm

He was the last man on Earth, all right. But— was he still a man?

by HARLAN ELLISON

Illustrated by WILIMCZYK

WHEN the sun sank behind the blasted horizon, its glare blotted out by the twisted wreckage rising obscenely against the hills, Seligman continued to glow.

He shone with a steady off-green aura that surrounded his body, radiated from the tips of his hair, crawled from his skin, and lit his way in the darkest night. It had been with him for two years now.

Though Seligman had never been a melodramatic man, he had more than once rolled the phrase through his mind, letting it fall from his lips: "I'm a freak."

Which was not entirely true. There was no longer anyone he might have termed "normal" for his comparison. Not only were there no more men, there was no more life of any kind. The silence was broken only by the searching wind, picking its way cautiously between the slow-rusting girders of a dead past.

Even as he said, "Freak!" his mind washed the word with two waves, almost as one: vindictiveness and a resignation inextricably bound in self-pity, hopelessness and hatred.

"*They* were at fault!" he screamed at the tortured piles of masonry in his path.

Across the viewer of his mind, thoughts twisted nimbly, knowing the route, having traversed it often before.

Man had reached for the stars, finding them within his reach were he willing to give up his ancestral home.

Those who had wanted space more than one planet had gone, out past the Edge, into the wilderness of no return. It would take years to get There, and the Journey Back was an unthinkable one. Time had set its seal upon them: Go, if you must, but don't look behind you.

So they had gone. They had left the steam of Venus, the grit-wind of Mars, the ice of Pluto, the sun-bake of Mercury. There had been no Earthmen left in the system of Sol. Except, of course, on Earth—which had been left to madmen.

And *they* had been too busy throwing things at each other to worry about the stars.

The men who knew no other answer stayed and fought. They were the ones who fathered the Attilas, the Genghis Khans, the Hitlers. They were the ones who pushed the buttons and launched the missiles that chased each other across the skies, fell like downed birds, exploded, blasted, cratered, chewed-out and carved-out the face of the

THIS STORY *marks Harlan Ellison's first appearance in a professional science-fiction magazine—but everyone even remotely familiar with science-fiction fandom has heard his name. He is editor-publisher of one of the largest and most polished fanzines (see "Fanfare" in this issue) ever to clog a mail slot and an amazingly versatile contributor of stories and articles to similar periodicals. Non-fans too, will be seeing his work often from now on!*

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planet. They were also the little men who had failed to resist, even as they had failed to look up at the night sky.

They were the ones who had destroyed the Earth.

Now no one was left. No man. Just Seligman. And he glowed.

"*They* were at fault!" he screamed again, and the sound was a lost thing in the night.

HIS mind carried him back through the years to the days near the end of what had to be the Last War, because there would be no one left to fight another. He was carried back again to the sterile white rooms where the searching instruments, the prying needles, the clucking scientists, all labored over him and his group.

They were to be a last-ditch throwaway. They were the indestructible men: a new breed of soldier, able to live through the searing heat of the bombs; to walk unaffected through the purgatory hail of radiation, to assault where ordinary men would have collapsed long before.

Seligman picked his way over the rubble, his aura casting the faintest phosphorescence over the ruptured metal and plastic shreds. He paused momentarily, eyeing the blasted remnants of a fence, to which clung a sign, held to the twined metal by one rusting bolt:

NEWARK SPACEPORT
ENTRANCE BY
AUTHORIZATION ONLY

Shards of metal scrap moved under his bare feet, their razored edges rasping against the flesh, yet causing no break in the skin. Another product of the sterile white rooms and the strangely-hued fluids injected into his body?

Twenty-three young men, routine volunteers, as fit as the era of war could produce, had been moved to the solitary block building in Salt

Lake City. It was a cubed structure with no windows and only one door, guarded night and day. If nothing else, they had security. No one knew the intensive experimentation going on inside those steel-enforced concrete walls, even the men upon whose bodies the experiments were being performed.

It was because of those experiments performed on him that Seligman was here now, alone. Because of the myopic little men with their foreign accents and their clippings of skin from his buttocks and shoulders, the bacteriologists and the endocrine specialists, the epidermis men and the blood-stream inspectors—because of all of them—he was here now, when no one else had lived.

Seligman rubbed his forehead at the base of the hairline. *Why* had he lived? Was it some strain of rare origin running through his body that had allowed him to stand the effects of the bombs? Was it a combination of the experiments performed on him—and only in a certain way on him, for none of the other twenty-two had lived—*and* the radiation? He gave up, for the millionth time. Had he been a student of the ills of man he might have ventured a guess, but it was too far afield for a common foot-soldier.

All that counted was that when he had awakened, pinned thighs, chest and arms under the masonry of a building in Salt Lake City, he was alive and could see. He could see, that is, till the tears clouded the vision of his own sick green glow.

It was life. But at times like this, with the flickering light of his passage marked on the ash-littered remains of his culture, he wondered if it was worth the agony.

HE NEVER really approached madness, for the shock of realizing he was totally and finally alone, without a voice or a face or a touch in all the world, overrode the smaller shock of his transformation.

He lived. He was that fabled, joked-about Last Man On Earth. But it wasn't a joke now.

Nor had the months after the final dust of extinction settled across the planet been a joke. Those months had labored past as he searched the country, taking what little food was still sealed from radiation—though why radiation should bother him he could not imagine; habit more

than anything—and disease, racing from one end of the continent in search of but one other human to share his torment.

But of course there had been no one. He was cut off like a withered arm from the body that was his race.

Not only was he alone, and with the double terror of an aura that never dimmed, sending the word, "Freak!" pounding through his mind, but there were other changes, equally terrifying. It had been in Philadelphia, while grubbing inside a broken store window that he had discovered another symptom of his change.

The jagged glass pane had ripped the shirt through to his skin—but had not damaged him. The flesh showed white momentarily, and then even that faded. Seligman experimented cautiously, then recklessly, and found that the radiations, or his treatments, or both, had indeed changed him. He was completely impervious to harm of a minor sort: fire in small amounts did not bother him, sharp edges could no more rip his flesh than they could a piece of treated steel, work produced no callouses; he was, in a limited sense of the word, invulnerable.

The indestructible man had been created too late. Too late to bring satisfaction to the myopic butchers who had puttered unceasingly about his body. Perhaps had they managed to survive they might still not comprehend what had occurred. It was too much like the product of a wild coincidence.

But that had not lessened his agony. Loneliness can be a powerful thing, more consuming than hatred, more demanding than mother love, more driving than ambition. It could, in fact, drive a man to the stars.

Perhaps it had been a communal yearning within his glowing breast; perhaps a sense of the dramatic or a last vestige of that unconscious debt all men owe to their kind; perhaps it was simply an urge to talk to someone. Seligman summed it up without soul-searching in the philosophy, "I can't be any worse off than I am now, so why not?"

It didn't matter really. Whatever the reason, he knew by the time his search was over that he must seek men out, wherever in the stars they might be, and tell them. He must be a messenger of death to his kin beyond the Earth. They would mourn

little, he knew, but still he had to tell them.

He would have to go after them and say, "Your fathers are gone. Your home is no more. They played the last hand of that most dangerous of games, and lost. The Earth is dead."

He smiled a tight, grim smile as he thought: At least I won't have to carry a lantern to them; they'll see me coming by my own glow. *Glow little glow worm, glimmer, glimmer . . .*

SELIGMAN threaded his way through the tortured wreckage and crumpled metalwork of what had been a towering structure of shining-planed glass and steel and plastic. Even though he knew he was alone, Seligman turned and looked back over his shoulder, sensing he was being watched. He had had that feeling many times, and he knew it for what it was. It was Death, standing straddle-legged over the face of the land, casting shadow and eternal silence upon it. The only light came from the lone man stalking toward the rocket standing sentry like a pillar of January ice in the center of the blast area.

His fingers twitched as he thought of the two years work that had gone into erecting that shaft of beryllium. Innumerable painstaking trips to and from the junk heaps of that field, pirating pieces from other ships, liberating cases of parts from bombed-out storage sheds, relentlessly forcing himself on, even when exhaustion cried its claim.

Seligman had not been a scientist or a mechanic. But determination, texts on rocket motors, and the original miracle of finding an only partially-destroyed ship with its drive still intact had provided him with a means to leave this place of death.

It was one of the latest model ships; a *Smith* class cruiser with conning bubble set far back on the tapered nose, and the ugly black depressions behind which the Bergsil cannons rested on movable tracks.

He climbed the hull-ladder into the open inspection hatch, finding his way easily, even without a torch. His fingers began running over the complicated leads of the drive-components, checking and re-checking what he already knew was sound and foolproof—or as foolproof as an amateur could make them.

Now that it was ready, and all that remained were these

routine check-tests and loading the food for the journey, he found himself more terrified of leaving than of remaining alone till he died—and when that might be with his stamina he had no idea.

How would they receive a man as transformed as he? Would they not instinctively fear, mistrust, despise him? *Am I stalling?* The question suddenly formed in his mind, causing his sure inspection to falter. Had he been purposely putting the takeoff date further and further ahead? Using the checks and other tasks as further attempts to stall? His head began to ache with the turmoil of his thoughts.

Then he shook himself in disgust. The tests were necessary, it was stressed repeatedly in all of the texts lying about the floor of the drive chamber.

His hands shook, but that same impetus which had carried him for two years forced him to complete the checkups. Just as dawn oozed up over the outline of the tatters that had been New York, he finished his work on the ship.

Without pause, sensing he must race, not with time, but with the doubts raging inside him, he climbed back down the ladder and began loading food boxes. They were stacked neatly to one side of a hand-powered lift he had restored. The hard rubber containers of concentrates and the bulbs of carefully-sought-out liquids made an imposing and somewhat perplexing sight.

Food is the main problem, he told himself. If I should get past a point of no return and find my food giving out, my chances would be nil. I'll have to wait till I can find more stores of food. He estimated the time needed for the search and realized it might be months, perhaps even another year till he had accrued enough from the wasted stores within any conceivable distance.

In fact, finding a meal in the city, after he had carted box after box of edibles out to the rocket, had become an increasingly more difficult job. Further, he suddenly realized he had not eaten since the day before.

The day before?

He had been so engrossed in the final touches of the ship he had completely neglected to eat. Well, it had happened before, even before the blast. With an effort he began to grope back, trying to remember the last time he *had* eaten. Then it became quite clear to him. It leaped out and

dissolved away all the delays he had been contriving. *He had not eaten in three weeks.*

Seligman had known it, of course. But it had been buried so deeply that he only half-feared it. He had tried to deny the truth, for when that last seemingly insurmountable problem was removed, there was nothing but his own inadequacies to prevent his leaving.

Now it came out, full-bloom. The treatments and radiation had done more than make him merely impervious to mild perils. He no longer needed to eat! He boggled at the concept for a moment, shaken by the realization that he had not recognized the fact before.

He had heard of anaerobic bacteria or yeasts that could derive their energy from other sources, without the normal oxidation of foods. Bringing the impossible to relatively homely terms made it easier for him to accept. Maybe it was even possible to absorb energy directly. At least he felt no slightest twinge of hunger, even after three weeks of back-breaking work without eating.

Probably he would have to take along a certain amount of proteins to replenish the body tissue he expended. But as for the bulky boxes of edibles dotting the space around the ship, most were no longer a necessity.

Now that he had faced up to the idea that he had been delaying through fear of the trip itself, and that there was nothing left to stop his leaving almost immediately, Seligman again found himself caught up in the old drive.

He was suddenly intent on getting the ship into the air and beyond.

DUSK mingled with the blotching of the sun before Seligman was ready. It had not been stalling this time, however. The sorting and packing of needed proteins took time. But now he was ready. There was nothing to keep him on Earth.

He took one last look around. It seemed the thing to do. Sentimentalism was not one of Seligman's more outstanding traits, but he did it in preparation for anyone who might ask him, "What did it look like—at the end?" It was with a twinge of regret that he brought the fact to mind; he had never really *looked* at his sterile world in the two years he had been preparing to leave it. One became accustomed to living in a pile of rubble, and after a

bit it no longer offered even the feel of an environment.

He climbed the ladder into the ship, carefully closing and dogging the port behind him. The chair was ready, webbing flattened back against the deep rubber pile of its seat and backrest. He slid into it and swung the control box down on its ball-swivel to a position before his face.

He drew the top webbing across himself and snapped its triple-lock clamps into place. Seligman sat in the ship he had not even bothered to name, fingers groping for the actuator button on the arm of the chair, glowing all the while, weirdly, in the half-light of the cabin.

So this was to be the last picture he might carry with him to the heavens: a bitter epitaph to a race misspent. No warning; it was too late for such puny action. All was dead and haunted on the face of the Earth. No blade of grass dared rise; no small life murmured in its burrows and caves, in the oddly dusty skies, or for all he knew, to the very bottom of the Cayman Trench. There was only silence. The silence of a graveyard.

He pushed the button.

The ship began to rise, waveringly. There was a total lack of the grandeur he remembered when the others had left. The ship sputtered and coughed brokenly as it climbed on its imperfect drive. Tremors shook the cabin and Seligman could feel something wrong, vibrating through the chair and floor into his body.

Its flames were not so bright or steady as those other take-offs, but it continued to rise and gather speed. The hull began to glow as the rocket lifted higher into the dust-filled sky.

Acceleration pressed down on Seligman, though not as much as he had expected. It was merely uncomfortable, not punishing. Then he remembered that he was not of the same stamp as those who had preceded him.

His ship continued to pull itself up out of the Earth's atmosphere. The hull oranged, then turned cherry, then straw-yellow, as the coolers within its skin fought to counteract the blasting fury.

Again and again Seligman could feel the *wrongness* of the climb. Something was going to give!

As the bulkheads to his right began to strain and buckle, he knew what it was. The ship had not been built or re-welded by trained ex-

perts, working in teams with the latest equipment. He had been one lone determined man, with only book experience to back him. Now his errors were about to tell.

The ship passed beyond the atmosphere, and Seligman stared in horror as the plates cracked and shattered outwards. He tried to scream as the air shrieked outwards, but it was already impossible.

Then he fainted.

WHEN the ship passed the moon, Seligman still sat, his body held in place by the now-constricted webbing, facing the gaping squares and sundered metal that had been the cabin wall.

Abruptly, the engines cut off. As though it were a signal, Seligman's eyes fluttered and opened wide.

He stared at the wall, his reviving brain grasping the final truth. The last vestige of humanity had been clawed from him. He no longer needed air to live.

His throat constricted, his belly knotted, and the blood that should theoretically be boiling pounded thickly in his throat. His last kinship with those he was searching was gone. If he had been a freak before, what was he *now?*

The turmoil fought itself out in him as the ship sped onward and he faced what he had become, what he must do.

He was more than a messenger, now. He was a shining symbol of the end of all humanity on Earth, a symbol of the evil their kind had done. The men out there would never treasure him, welcome him, or build proud legends around him. But they could never deny him. He was a messenger from the grave.

They would see him in the airless cabin, even before he landed. They would never be able to live with him, but they would have to listen to him, and to believe.

Seligman sat in the crash-chair in the cabin that was dark except for the eerie glow that was part of him. He sat there, lonely and eternally alone. And slowly, a grim smile grew on his lips.

The bitter purpose that had been forced on him was finally clear. For two years, he had fought to find an escape from the death and loneliness of ruined Earth. Now that was impossible. One Seligman was enough.

Alone? He hadn't known the meaning of the word before! It would be his job to make *sure* that he was alone —alone among his people, until the end of time. ∞ ∞

The Futile Flight of John Arthur Benn

He forgot the most important rule of time-travel: don't fall asleep!

by EDWARD HALIBUT

BY PUTTING himself into reverse, the doom-intended man left the twentieth century far ahead. Nineteen fifty-six was a good year to get out of. John Arthur Benn watched the roaring twenties go by, and the gay nineties, backwards, and wondered how it would be to pilot a riverboat on the Mississippi, or to fight under John Paul Jones.

Before he was really aware of it, he was for a speeding second a contemporary of another John — Smith — and thought about the life of the Redman before the colonists began changing things around. By that time the scenery had begun to get monotonous—just shrinking trees—and John Arthur Benn swung over into lateral. Ah, England.

There went another namesake—Ben Jonson—and in a very little while he considered slowing down to meet still another. But King Arthur flashed past and into a womb in West Wales just as John was convulsed by a sneeze (it was quite drafty and he should have dressed more warmly), and as he stuffed his handkerchief back in his pocket he caught just a tantalizing glimpse of an interesting Druid ceremony.

John Arthur Benn blacked out somewhere in the limbo of the pre-Christian era, as he'd been warned he might, and when he came to he found himself lying in a rather uncomfortable heap with his head in a mushroom patch. The mushrooms and the trees around him weren't shrinking any more, so John knew he'd stopped—or at least was going very slowly. After a while he decided he wasn't going at all, and got to his feet.

It seemed very pleasant here, in the woods, so he found a fallen tree to sit on and took a wrapped sandwich and a small vacuum bottle of coffee out of his pocket. When he'd finished his meal he walked to a stream nearby, rinsed the bottle, tossed the waxed paper onto the water to be carried away and pocketed the vacuum bottle.

Now, he thought, what? This was scarcely dinosaur country. At this point a wild boar chased him up a tree. To be killed by a boar would be ignominious, after all this, although the animal was well enough tusked to have done the job, and so John Arthur Benn climbed to a high branch, where the boar's persistence forced him to spend the night. He slept, somehow, and, with the closing of his conscious mind—the one that wanted to meet a dinosaur in fatal combat—the conventional subconscious, which also sought suicide, but in a more familiar way, shifted him out of reverse.

When he awoke, he was back in 1956, in Philadelphia. Irrevocably, John Arthur Benn knew.

He went home and hanged himself in a closet.

∞ ∞ ∞

MURDER, ANYONE? Some of your favorite science-fiction writers—men like Robert Bloch, Bryce Walton, Jerome Bixby and William Tenn—also appear regularly in INFINITY's companion magazine, SUSPECT DETECTIVE STORIES. Try a copy, for thrills and suspense!

Mars' sands are red;
Earth's face is too:
We were too green,
And now we're blue!

Illustrated by STALLMAN

COURSE OF EMPIRE

by RICHARD WILSON

THE OLDER MAN sat down on the grassy bank on the hill overlooking the orchard. The autumn sun was bright but the humidity was low and there was a breeze.

The younger man sprawled next to him.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Thanks," said Roger Boynton. He looked across the valley, past the apple trees, to the fine white-columned house on the hill beyond. He

smiled reminiscently. "A friend of mine once owned that house. A fellow commissioner in World Government. He and I used to sit on this very hill, sometimes. We'd munch on an apple or two that we'd picked on our way through the orchard. Winesaps, they're called."

"You were telling me about the colonizing," said Allister gently, after a pause.

The older man sighed. "Yes." He put out the cigarette carefully, stripped it, scattered the tobacco and wadded the paper into a tiny ball. "I was commissioner of colonies. I had to decide, after my staff had gathered all the data, who would be the best man to put in charge. It was no easy decision."

"I can imagine."

"You can't really. There were so many factors, and the data were actually quite skimpy. The way it worked out, to be candid with you, was on the basis of the best guess. And some of the guesses were pretty wild. We knew Mars was sandy, for instance, and so we put a Bedouin in charge. That pleased the Middle East, in general, and Jordan in particular. Jordan donated a thousand camels under Point Four point four."

"I beg your pardon?" said Allister.

"That's not double-talk. Point Four was the old terrestrial program for underdeveloped countries. World Government adopted it and broadened it. Mars is the fourth planet, so—" he traced 4.4 in the air, stabbing a finger at the imaginary point "—Point Four point four. It was undoubtedly somebody's little whimsy in the beginning, but then it became accepted for the descriptive term that it was."

"I see." The young man looked vague. He stubbed out his cigarette carelessly, so that it continued to smolder in the grass.

"Venus was the rainy planet," Boynton said, looking with disapproval at the smoking butt, though he did nothing about it, "so we put an Englishman in charge. England sent a crate of Alligators."

The young man looked startled.

"Alligator raincoats," Boynton said. "Things weren't very well organized. Too many things were happening too fast. There was a lot of confusion and although the countries wanted to do what was best, no one knew exactly what that was. So they impro-

vised as best they could on the basis of their little knowledge."

"Was it a dangerous thing?"

"The little knowledge? No, not dangerous. Just inefficient. Then there was Jupiter. We didn't bother about Mercury, although for a time there was some uninformed talk about sending an Equatorial African to do what he could."

"Who went to Jupiter?" Allister asked.

"The United States clamored for Jupiter and got it. The argument was that the other planets would be a cinch to colonize because of their similarity to Earth but that Jupiter needed a real expert because it had only its surface of liquid gas and the Red Spot."

"What's that?"

"I'm sorry. I'd forgotten you were just a youngster when all this was going on. The Red Spot is the Jovians' space platform. They built it a long time ago and then they retrogressed, the way people do, and forgot how they'd done it. Earth sent an engineer to see if it could be done again. The Spot was pretty overpopulated and no real job of colonization could be done until we built one more."

"And did you?"

"Well, we started to. Before we could really go to work anywhere, though, we had to solve the language problem. An Australian went to work on that. He'd had a background of Melanesian pidgin, and if anyone was suited to the job of cross-breeding four languages into one, he was."

"Four languages?"

"Yes. English was the official language of Earth. Then there was Martian, Venusian *chat-chat,* and Spotian. It was a queer amalgam, but it could be understood by everyone, more or less."

"So that's where it came from. *Chikker-im-up-im chat-chat too-much,* eh? Interplanetary *bêche de mer.*"

"Exactly. Only of course it was called *bêche d'espace. Me two-fellah vimb' kitch-im pjoug by'm by.* But even after the language difficulty was solved, we had our troubles. They already had camels on Mars, for instance, and the Martians were amazed when we brought in more. Particularly because theirs were wild and semi-intelligent and the first thing the Martian camels did was come over and liberate their brothers from Earth. They never did come back.

"Same sort of thing with

the raincoats on Venus. It doesn't rain *down* there, as we know now. It sort of mists *up*. From the ground. Soaks up under a raincoat in no time. These were just petty annoyances, of course, but they were symptomatic of the way our half-baked planning operated."

"You didn't know about the people of Ganymede then?"

"No. We were so busy trying to build another Red Spot that we never did get to Jupiter's satellites. Oh, it was partly a matter of appropriations, too. The budget commission kept explaining to us that there was only so much money and that we'd better show a profit on what we had before we put in a request to go tooling off to colonize some new place. I guess the 'Medeans first came when you were about ten?"

"Eleven," the younger man said.

"They scouted our colonies and came directly to Earth. They took right over and colonized *us*."

A 'Medean overseer climbed the hill effortlessly. He was tall and tentacled and the breathing apparatus over his head gave him the appearance of a mechanical man.

"*Kigh-kigh pinis*," the 'Medean said. "*You two-fella all-same chat-chat too-much. B'phava b'long work he-stop 'long orchard pick-im apple.*"

The two men stood up and obediently walked down the hill toward the apple orchard.

"Why does he have to talk to us in that pidgin?" the young man asked. "They all speak English as well as you and me. It's insulting."

"That's why they do it, I think," said Boynton, the former commissioner of colonies. "They're so much better at colonizing than we were that I guess they feel they have a right to rub it in."

The 'Medean had overheard them.

"Damn right," he said.

∞ ∞ ∞

ATTENTION WRITERS: Damon Knight, Judith Merril and James Blish are making tentative plans for a science-fiction writers' conference to be held next summer in Milford, Pa. Dates, prices, etc., have not been settled, and reservations are not wanted now. What is wanted, if you are interested, is a letter telling something about yourself—experience, training, stories sold (if any), and so on. Later progress reports on the conference will go out directly. Address: Damon Knight, P. O. Box 164, Milford, Pike Co., Pa.

EMSH

To the Rachens, it was just good clean sport—
Dirk Gilmore, it was a business proposition.
But either way, it was Gilmore's life that was at stake!

QUARRY

by KENNETH BULMER

Illustrated by EMSH

DIRK GILMORE signed his death warrant with fingers that had long ago forgotten how to tremble. You kept a stony face and hard eyes if you wanted to stay alive. In this city you learned that early. More often than not that wasn't enough, though, with the Rachens running everything—and then things got really tough.

Like now. Like the hunger that lay waiting in his stomach, ready to rend his guts if he dared eat. Like the rags that stretched across his shoulders, too pitiable to pawn. But clean. Libby always kept him and Jimmy clean, if nothing else.

"That's fine, Mr. Gilmore, just fine." Across the plastic desk the fat man's eyes chuckled with good humor, making Gilmore want to lean across and push a bony fist into the swabs of fat. Rachentoad! Just a dirty Rachen-lover.

"When do I start?" The words were rasped rather than spoken.

"Now, now, my boy, take it easy." Fatso waggled a soggy forefinger. "We've got to put you in good shape before you start hunting."

"I get to eat, then?"

Fatso looked shocked. "Of course. Why, Metropolitan Safaris has a great reputation. Yes, sir, the very finest. We have to maintain—"

"Save it. I've signed."

Fatso coughed, his flabby face reddening. He waved a hand.

"Through there, Mr. Gilmore. Mr. Hammond will take care of everything."

Gilmore stood up. He didn't bother to answer. No one likes to look his own degradation in the face. Especially when you have to try to make it worthwhile to live with it. He went across the deep pile rug, his broken shoes soundless. Fatso stared after him with narrowed eyes and Gilmore shifted his broad back under the scrutiny, feeling the muscles pull across wasted flesh.

He'd come back, he told himself, fists clenched. He'd come back. Sure, he'd be one of the guys who did come back. But he didn't really believe it. *Libby—Libby, you she-devil. Just for young Jimmy, that's all. Just for Jimmy. God! The things a man did.* He went through the door.

Hammond was one of the new school that had shot up like unhealthy fungus since the Rachen came in their faster-than-light ships to take over the Solar System. He was an Earthman all right, like Fatso, without that indefinable tang that all Rachens had, that alien sense that put kitten-footed itches up your spine. He had a thin black mustache and wet lips.

"Mr. Gilmore!" Hammond was looking at him with a detached professional pity. "We'll have you processed in no time at all, no time at all."

"When do I draw the first check?"

"As soon as Medical has finished with you. You'll have to spend a little time getting into shape and until we know you are going to be suitable for hunting, well, we—"

"You don't pay out on bum-starters. All right. Just make it fast."

Hammond went across to a wall panel and fiddled with the controls. He said, without looking round: "Someone—someone special—waiting on this money, Mr. Gilmore?"

"Yes."

KENNETH BULMER *is well-known in his native England, having written several pocket-sized books as well as stories for all the British science-fiction magazines. When he visited the United States recently, as his country's official delegate to the 13th World Science-Fiction convention at Cleveland, the editors of* INFINITY *lost no time in persuading him to start submitting to us as well. Ken in person is erudite, reserved, and exceptionally pleasant; his first "American" story is concerned with suspenseful action in a grim future. You'll get a jolt from* QUARRY!

Hammond faced around suddenly. His eyes were distant, uninterested in what his lips were saying.

"Mr. Gilmore, you get twenty-five thousand dollars out of this deal. Ten thousand as soon as you pass fit for hunting, the rest at the finish."

"That I know." Gilmore allowed his face to sag just a trifle, enough so that it looked as though he might be smiling. "And I might get the other fifty."

He didn't like the way Hammond laughed. Hell—some guys collected that extra fifty. Not many; but some.

"Listen to me, Mr. Gilmore. If you'll agree to accept a final payment, here and now, of five thousand, we'll consider the whole deal washed up. You'll flunk medical, and walk out of here five grand up. How does that sound?"

"It doesn't figure." Gilmore was genuinely puzzled. Who would buck the Rachens, offer to bribe a man out of their schemes? There was no Underground on Earth any more. The Rachens didn't like opposition. The only answer was that this was some subtle psychological test, to grade him in toughness and discover just how much he had in him.

He said: "Five grand is kid stuff. I want the jackpot."

AFTER that there was nothing further to be said. Hammond processed him smoothly: blood count, cranial index, respiration, muscle co-ordination, ear and eye indices. They were neat operators, Gilmore had to hand them that. In five days that passed in monochromatic similarity they built him up so that he felt as fit, as tough, as he ever had. Which, in his case, meant plenty rugged. Nothing further was said about the five thousand offer. It was the only sour note.

Gilmore became used to the barracks, the long eating

rooms, the gym, the exercise yard. Here in the center of the city, one hundred stories up, Metropolitan Safaris groomed its stock in trade. He met other men. The subject of why they were here was never raised. Why bother? It was all so painfully obvious.

Came the day when Gilmore was called into Fatso's office. This time the rags, the broken shoes, the wasted flesh were gone. In their place a sharp suit of suntans and rolling muscle. Gilmore felt good.

"A check is being mailed out to your wife today, Mr. Gilmore," Fatso began.

Gilmore cut him off. "I don't want that. Make it payable to Jimmy Gilmore. My son."

"As you wish. It isn't important."

"It is to me."

Fatso brushed that irritably aside. He steepled his podgy fingers. "We've decided to run you as one of a pair—"

"No dice!" Gilmore said hotly. "You can't welch on me like that. Pairs don't collect the full twenty-five, even I know that."

"If you'll just let me finish, you might understand the situation." Fatso was getting angry.

"Well, it better sound good."

"Mr. Gilmore. You applied for a position with this company. We decided to take you on, give you the chance to earn twenty-five thousand. I think you owe us a little civility."

"All right. I'm civil. Now just tell me how I get that twenty-five running paired."

"You've heard of the Prince Dar-Lesseps, of course."

"Son of Mars' Controller. Yeah—I've heard."

"He is tired of safaris on Mars. He has honored this company with his business. We have to put on a full-scale hunt for him on Earth. He has had no prior experience of safaris in big cities."

"How miserable he must have been."

Fatso's nostrils quivered, but he went on speaking as though explaining two-times-two to a non-Euclidean.

"He is young and anxious to experience new things. He is willing to hunt according to Earth City rules. But he wants a paired hunt. More fun, he thinks." Fatso smiled. "Personally, I agree with him."

Gilmore almost said: "You would." He decided against it. He'd needled Fatso enough.

Instead, he said: "Earth City rules. That means projectile weapons only. No energy weapons. Could be the boy's biting off more than he can chew."

A shadowed uncertainty appeared in Fatso's eyes. Gilmore caught it. The fat guy was worried. Something here was wrong; something had a bad smell. Gilmore filed that away, although he knew with sardonic self-condemnation that there was precious little he could do about anything once he had signed. The Rachens paid big money—but big—for their hunts, and Fatso would challenge the Devil for a slice of it. Gilmore wondered if he'd go up against a Rachen for that money. Somehow, he felt that the fat man would.

"The hunt is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. The Prince gets in from Mars tonight and has some official calls to make."

Gilmore sucked in his breath. So soon. And here came the sixty-four million dollar question: "How long?" Fatso was eyeing him analytically, watching to see if any sign of a breakup showed.

Fatso said: "Hunt's for twenty-four hours."

Gilmore couldn't say anything. A great weight seemed to be pushing his chest in. It was hard to breath.

He got air into his lungs and nodded. "That makes it a cool twelve thousand overtime, then. A thousand an hour over twelve hours."

"Correct, Mr. Gilmore."

"Jimmy can use the money, at that."

"You appreciate that, because we have such an important customer, we are paying single rates for your paired run?"

"Thank you."

There was no question that Metropolitan Safaris would try to welsh. They had a reputation to maintain. Jimmy ought to do nicely on the money coming to him. There remained the final question. Gilmore asked it.

"You'll meet your partner day after tomorrow, at zero hour. We have to take some—that is—"

"Save it. The Prince'll make out okay. Your precautions won't alter what happens very much."

"I'll see you just before you begin, Mr. Gilmore. Until then—"

But Gilmore wasn't listening. Running paired meant he might have an easier time. But it might mean that he couldn't pull some of the dodges he had been working

on. And he desperately wanted to come through alive, now, more than ever. Funny how your morale went up and down with the incidence of eating and shaving. And he'd come through—and to hell with his partner.

EVERYTHING that he needed to know had been explained to him by the time he entered the elevator and shot down to ground floor. The clock said six. The foyer was a desert of glass, with distorted reflections from outside lying like puddles of mercury across the floor. A technician strapped the tracer on his wrist, keying the infernal gadget so that he couldn't take it off without removing his arm as well. Gilmore grunted. That sort of clinched things.

Fatso and his sidekick, Hammond, were there, smiling. Across at the bar a group of men and Rachens were drinking desultorily. Gilmore repressed his instinctive surge of hate and loathing for the men. Men? Hell, no! Rachentoads! Men who could work with the Rachens.

It occurred to him that he, too, was working for the aliens. He knocked that stupid idea out of his mind angrily. If he could kill one of them he'd do so as thoughtlessly as stepping on an insect.

The clock indicated that it was time to get started. He wondered how Prince Dar-Lesseps had filled in his time on Earth so far. Fatso, giving the impression of cringing, went over to the Rachens and they came back with him. Gilmore stood cold and contained, fighting his nausea.

"Mr. Gilmore, this is the Prince Dar-Lesseps." Fatso went on introducing Gilmore to the others of the party. Gilmore eyed the Prince. Young, brash, ultra-fashionably dressed, with a nervous tic in his eyelids that could come from too many Earth drinks, or too much of other Earthly relaxations.

"I trust you'll give us a good run, Mr. Gilmore?" The Prince's voice was high and hard, habitually used to being the boss.

"I'll do what I can," Gilmore said flatly.

"Good." Dar-Lesseps looked round. "And where is the other?"

"Here," Fatso said.

Gilmore hadn't noticed her before, standing a little to one side. She had a crew cut, wore dark shirt and pants like himself, with heavy-duty brogans giving her slender legs

a clumsy look. He didn't notice her face.

Something boiled up inside him.

"You can't run me with a woman!" he shouted. "Hell, what is this, a slaughterhouse or a safari?"

Fatso began making clucking noises. Dar-Lesseps looked as though an offensive smell had won through his scents. Gilmore didn't care. He had mentioned a slaughterhouse and they were shocked. So all right. What chance would he have lugging a woman around?

"The Prince especially desired a woman, Mr. Gilmore. You will have to accept that. It is in the contract you signed."

There wasn't much point in arguing further. He would have to go along with the deal, for Jimmy's sake. Clamping his mouth shut so that his jaws whitened, Gilmore clumped outside onto the sidewalk.

The city was huge, bright with morning sun. Glittering, palpitating, soaring skyward —and completely dead.

This was where men had once lived together. This was the personification of all their dreams, from the stone cave through the atomic and electronic age. And now the Rachens had come and decided that the city would make a pleasant playground. So men had been moved out, to settle in other places and try to forget the wonder they had created and had had stolen.

A streetcar went by soundlessly, completely empty, the remote control drive operating from Traffic Center. It stopped, waited, the doors opening and closing, and then went on with a cheerful *ding!* of a hidden bell. It was still early enough for a Sanitation Department cleaning truck to whir busily down the street, spraying and brushing and mopping. Somehow, Gilmore felt very lonely—far more lost than he had when answering the advertisement on first arriving here.

Prince Dar-Lesseps beckoned to his gun bearers. He still looked as though he'd caught a whiff of some sewer; but he spoke to Gilmore pleasantly enough.

"Would you care to inspect the guns now, Mr. Gilmore?"

More because he was interested than because he feared any infringement of the rules, Gilmore took the proferred weapon. He kept his face immobile when he racked back the bolt on an empty chamber. No one was likely to trust him with a loaded weapon

just now. The rifle was a bolt action .280, with peep backsight and facilities for a clip-on telescopic sight when required. Gilmore checked the magazine. Ten, and one up the spout—say eleven shots. Worth remembering.

He was about to hand the gun back when the girl said: "Do you mind?"

Gilmore was startled. He thrust the gun at her, off-balance from preoccupation with one consuming desire. If the girl was his partner then she had every right to inspect the hunting party's weapons. He felt impatience bubble in him. He wanted to get started, get away into the hungry concrete and glass jungle of the city. Fatso coughed and rubbed his hands together.

"Well, Prince, I guess that about ties things up. Tracers working okay? Good. Now, Miss Ransome and Mr. Gilmore, if you'll just move off we can have a drink while we're waiting."

Hammond moved across officiously. His face had a waxy look.

"You fully understand the limits on this hunt? The wire will be de-activated twenty-four hours from now, directly across Town Center. Here are tokens to operate automats for your food." The nervous way Hammond licked his lips puzzled Gilmore. The aide moved across so that, for a brief instant, he was between Gilmore and the Rachens. Gilmore felt the tokens in his hand, small round coins, and then, with a shock that sent electric tingles through him, the hard and unmistakable outline of a spurt gun. Without thinking he thrust the thing into his pants pocket.

Fatso waved his hand. Hammond, his face ghastly, stepped aside. Gilmore and the girl began to walk slowly along the street.

The hunt had begun.

AT THE first intersection they took a streetcar. Sitting on a rocking-horse when he was a kid had once made Gilmore sick. He felt like that now. The girl didn't say anything, just sat looking back the way they had come. Gilmore looked ahead, trying to decide the best place to leave the car. That was the first problem. After that came the question of the spurt gun and why Hammond had acted in the way he had.

"We'll get off here," the girl said, her voice a metallic bell over the sibilance of the car. She stood up.

Gilmore lifted an eyebrow

at her. "We'll get off when I say so, Sister."

Her smile was unpleasant, the way it disfigured the soft curves around her cheeks. She pulled the stop cord.

"Here, Buster." The doors opened with a pneumatic clash. "We're getting off here. We can transfer to a downtown car and make them think we're heading for the dock section."

"That's where I intended to head for."

"Sure. And don't you think they knew it? Get wise, Buster."

Gilmore flushed. He jumped down onto the street and together they cut across the intersection. No other car was in sight and all the eerie hollowness of the deserted city came down to overwhelm him.

"Gives you the creeps, this place." She was twisting the tracer on her wrist in a reflex action that held Gilmore's eyes. "You keep expecting to meet someone . . ."

"Snap out of it, Sister," he said roughly. "So long as this tracer chains us together, just so long you keep out of my hair."

"All right, tough guy, I'm not getting the screaming heebies. And, say, I kinda don't like being called Sister. My name's Trina. Use it."

"Mine's Dirk," he had said before he realized just what this little bit of hearts and flowers might mean. She'd had her own way about where they got off the car. That would be the first and last time, Gilmore vowed. He glanced at the wrist watch supplied by Metropolitan Safaris.

"When do they start?" Trina said.

"Fifteen minutes. We'd better take this car for ten or so and then dive. Agree?"

"Roger." They waited for the car to stop and pick them up and ten minutes later, with the feeling that he had left it far too late, Gilmore pulled the cord. "The docks are down there," he said, running at her side towards a granite building towering seventy stories. "That's as good a start as we'll get. Once they figure we didn't head that way they'll have quite some territory to cover."

Trina said: "They'll find us."

They ducked into the building. It was dark and cool, with water splashing somewhere not far off. Gradually, reacting to their presence, automatic hidden fluorescents came on.

"Sure they'll find us." Gilmore was trying to sort out

the map of the city he carried in his head. "Sure. But under Earth City rules, tracers are fixed to operate only inside a half-mile diameter. They'll take time, too."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Trina said casually. "But these tracers dim out at a hundred yards. They've got to be within a quarter mile of us but not closer than a hundred yards—"

"Sorry, Trina. Wrong." Gilmore's voice was bitter. "These tracers are set for fifty yards—or didn't they tell you?"

"The dirty low-down double-crossing bums!"

Gilmore laughed. The sound crackled in brittle echoes across the glass foyer, under the lights, played around the fountain. She looked so cute and mad that he almost forgot what this was all about. "So they played tough girl Trina for a sucker. Well, well."

"Hadn't you better be seeing about spotting them, Buster?"

"Okay. We'll take the elevator up. Not much risk this early in the game."

Riding the cage up, Gilmore tried to make up his mind just how he should handle this unwanted girl who had been foisted on him. She appeared capable, but that might be only talk. It was easy to talk tough; when the bullets came spattering around was the time to act, and talkers often didn't act.

He liked the look of her, though. He liked the slim, lissom back; the way she had of holding her head back when she spoke; the way she filled the dark shirt; the way her eyes were clear and unsmudged. Hell—he was getting sentimental, with a safari breathing down his neck.

Well—not quite. The view from the roof was immense, scouring away emotion by its scope. They spoke desultorily, in semi-whispers, their eyes searching and probing the canyon streets below. Of course, they wouldn't see anyone yet. But they would—they would.

Gilmore checked his watch. "Eight o'clock."

"Twenty-two and a half hours," Trina said.

"That's right." Gilmore could feel the weight of the spurt gun in his pocket. The possible motives behind Hammond's behavior stimulated his imagination. He'd always considered that there most emphatically was not an Underground left active on Earth. He could be wrong. First Hammond had tried to

buy him off. Then he had given him a gun, a nasty little weapon that fired ten .5″ slugs for a range of twenty-five feet and then, its air reservoir empty, was tossed away. Why?

"Listen, Dirk," Trina said with an odd inflection to her voice. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to check how much rope these tracers allow us?"

"Sure." He began to walk away from her across the roof. Above him the sky was blued milk. It was going to be a hot day. And then the pain hit. His wrist was encircled by a living ring of biting insects, gnawing, tearing, thrilling his nerves with unbearable agony. Trina stumbled towards him, her mouth open, eyes glazed. Quickly, Dirk caught her in his arms, felt the panting surge of her body as she fought the shudders.

"Ten feet," he said. "That's all they allowed us."

Pearls of moisture made a diadem across her forehead. She tried to smile, swallowed, and said: "I'm okay. Sorry."

"Let's get out of here," he said roughly. The roof was suddenly an ugly place.

ON THE street again, they peered cautiously uptown. A single robot taxi, cruising in the hope of fares long since dead, passed on silent tires. Beyond it, at the intersection, they saw a streetcar stop, ding its bell, and go on.

The car seemed full of people.

Gilmore said: "We go the other way."

He hadn't realized, until they were in a car traveling uptown, that she had been holding on to his upper arm with fingers that sank into the muscle. Despite his first reaction of annoyance, he let her hand stay there. They were in this together. They had to be a team.

"Why doesn't this car go faster?" Trina was saying.

He didn't answer.

He couldn't tell whether the hunting party had picked them up or not. If they had, their first reaction would have been to leave that car and spread out for the kill. Of course, they might have spotted the quarry and decided to let it run for a while, give it a fright, a sight of the gun, added impetus for a better chase. Gilmore's insides tightened up into an impotent knot.

They went downtown, then cut across, and rode uptown again on the subway. The city was a blanketing weight on

their spirits. Empty. Echoing. Clean. Scientifically designed to house, feed and transport ten million people. And in all that area only they lived—and the hunters.

Except for Metropolitan Safaris in their offices atop the tallest building—and they might as well have been in another world.

"Let's go take a look at the wire," Gilmore said.

"All right. Might be a good idea, at that."

"They'll expect us to look it over before nightfall, anyway; but I have a hunch they won't bother us too much until then."

"What time is it?"

"Quarter after ten."

"Twenty hours and fifteen minutes. That's not so long."

Gilmore grunted. "It all depends on the viewpoint."

On the way to the wire they stopped off at an automat and ate fresh fried chicken from plastic plates. It didn't seem in the least unreal to Gilmore. Incongruous, perhaps; but the world had become tiredly used to incongruity since the Rachen had come. Oh, no, they weren't iron-heeled, jack-booted conquerors. Why should they be with the sweet set-up they had? They had said, simply, that they wished to integrate with Earth's economy, and they had done just that. The funny thing was that a graduating Earthman and Rachen, leaving college, always seemed to wind up at opposite ends of the social scale.

The government was one hundred percent Rachen. If Terrans questioned that on legal grounds they found they had none. If they tried to alter their overlords, they were met with dirty politics, and if they attempted to overthrow the government—well, the law said they could be shot. They were.

As if by sleight-of-hand, Earth's birthright had been taken away. Earth's sons starved, and died, and gazed despairingly at the picture of their world they could no longer understand.

Like Gilmore. An honor graduate, happy to be a street-sweeper, and slowly starving. Then even that job went to another with more pull. He'd fought so hard to make a life, with no help from Libby, that the scars were deep in his mind. He wished there *were* an Underground—the spurt gun dragging down his pocket seemed, suddenly, like a holy grail.

And, remembering his life, he felt that he would never recall that humiliating expe-

rience ever again in quite the same way. He didn't like to think of the looks Libby had sent his way. So he'd been a failure—hadn't there been plenty of others? And how many of them had the guts to get a job with a Safari company?

Other people made some sort of living in the world, held on to crumbling standards. Superficially, there wasn't a lot of difference between the post-Rachen world and the pre-Rachen. Except that the Earth gave of its bounty to aliens. And the aliens liked sport. And they could pay.

Everyone knew that there was no more deadly quarry than man.

Which made the human safari business quite profitable. Unfortunately, it was also wasteful. Lying on his belly under a traffic ramp Gilmore tried to hold onto his conviction that he wouldn't be wasted.

IN FRONT of them the wire stretched taut and uncaring across the city approaches. They stared at the tall, gray, inhuman rampart, noticing the insulators at regular intervals and the rainbow colors playing along the interlacing wires. It was like a giant chicken wire. Grass tickled Gilmore's nose.

"If you walked into that now, you'd fry," whispered Trina.

"There's the gate," Gilmore nodded his head. "Remember."

"We're going through there, Dirk, both of us. Safely."

They lay there until Gilmore felt he couldn't look at his prison wall another minute. The wire penning them in the city was an obscene thing. He began to stand up and the bullet sent a clod of earth to sting his cheek. He dropped. They rolled under the ramp.

"Saw two of them getting out of a taxi," Trina said. She had been looking into the city, and her face under the dirt marks was strained. Gilmore remembered the hard feel of the spurt gun when he'd rolled over.

"We can shake them through the ramp. Come on."

They raced through the shadows, came cautiously out into sunshine again. Across the street a car was gliding to a stop. Panting, they were in it, hearing the *thunk* of the doors. The car started. Bullets made a lace pattern of the rear windows.

"Clumsy work," Gilmore said, wiping his face. "Just

trying to scare us. They're beating us back for the Prince."

"Yeah. He's the big wheel."

"It's his hunt. No one else will dare make the kill."

"So—we stay away from his high muckiness."

Gilmore looked at her. "And where is he right now?" he snapped, an edge to his voice that brought the girl erect in her seat.

"You're the brains of this side, Buster. You figure it."

Gilmore laughed. His hand closed over the girl's.

"Okay, Trina. So we shake on it."

She waited a second, and then, quite easily, freed her hand. She kept her face towards the window, and Gilmore could see only the way the sunlight caught the stiff hairs of her crew cut and turned each one into a shining spear. He swallowed.

"Let's duck this car here," he said. "They know we're aboard."

"All right." Her voice was strangely subdued.

They ran afoul of other members of the Prince's hunting party later that morning, and threw them at the expense of a gashed arm and leg. The automat vended bandages too, and Trina dressed her leg and Gilmore's arm. They ate. Then, a luxury that they'd contemptuously dismissed because they could never afford it, they smoked cigarettes.

"The condemned man—" began Gilmore.

"Shut up, Dirk!" Trina's face had gone stiff with strain. "Don't talk that way! We're coming out of this alive."

"So we do—okay. Only a joke."

"What's the time?"

"Three-thirty."

"Fifteen hours."

Gilmore looked past her head through the window and saw the men come running from the street. He took her arm and flung her violently into the back of the store. They rummaged frantically for a side exit, found one, fell through and began running up the street. Their feet made applause on the flags. Granite walls caught the sound and flung it back, magnified and mocking, taunting them with their stupidity.

"Quick! In here!"

Trina thrust Gilmore roughly into the revolving glass doors of a department store. They clattered past the empty counters, where still lights burned over lavish, pathetic, displays. They slid to a halt and bundled them-

selves, panting, into a crevice between counters. The glass doors revolved—no one came through.

This was the hell of it, Gilmore knew with repressed fury bubbling inside him, this was the worst part. The waiting. Not the leisurely waiting of a moment ago; but the strained, tense, panicky expectation of the next second's bullet. Trina was breathing rapidly, trying to control it, failing, and making a noise like a little trapped thing of the woods.

The doors whirled slowly to a standstill. Gilmore decided he could risk a quick look beyond, and, with his muscles tensed to lift him, heard the soft slur of feet on marble. In a single flurry of movement, he sprang at the man's throat, caught him, came back with two stiff fingers in his nostrils, then kicked twice, quite scientifically, as he was falling.

"I—I didn't see him!" Trina said, horrified.

"He was smart. He came in the side exit. Okay, leave him. Let's go."

"Just a minute." Trina bent over the body, took the knife, looked up helplessly. "No gun."

"No. Just a beater. Come on."

"But—"

"Come *on!*"

A PLASTER dummy, shaped like an anatomically impossible film star, sprayed plaster and dust over them. It crashed over. Another fan of bullets brought down an immense glass cabinet.

They broke for the back of the building, slipping through a fire exit barely in front of a succession of solid thuds on the metal. They crossed the street, the sun throwing long wavering shadows before them, went at a dead run down the subway incline. In the car, clattering over the ties, Trina put a hand shakily to her hair. Gilmore saw the gesture, recognized that the crew cut was an innovation.

"The beater ran into us unexpectedly," he said thoughtfully. "The guns were slow. That is—if they meant it that time."

"But—I didn't see him!" Trina said again.

"You will, when it matters," Gilmore said. Cold comfort; but the girl was obviously shaken. It was only then that he began to wonder just what she was doing here at all. No one ever mentioned reasons at Metropolitan Safaris—Gilmore knew that. And, anyway, he hadn't seen

the girl there, during his period of recuperation and preparation for the hunt. Perhaps—the thought struck a dagger of revulsion through him—she was here only as an added fillip in the Prince's game. Perhaps she was on their side, to string him along, and come in gloating at the end. He looked at her, his brows drawn down. She smiled back shakily, doubt clouding her eyes.

"What is it, Dirk?"

"Oh, just wondering. How you got here, f'rinstance."

"That. Well. A man. Money. You know."

"Anybody special?"

"I used to think so. Not any more. When I get back, I'll . . ."

"We'll get out of this, and collect that extra fifty thousand each." He leaned over and squeezed her hand. "You will see."

"What time is it?"

"Three forty-five."

"Fourteen hours, forty-five minutes."

Gilmore nodded, and found them cigaretes. They alighted at the next stop, crossed the platform and rode back again. Still he could not quite bring himself to tell this girl about the spurt gun. Later; yes, later. When he could see what would happen more clearly.

Later turned out to be a long wait.

THEY criss-crossed on the subway, figuring that that gave them even chances. The tough time would come when they made their way through to the wire. They had to be there, ready to break out when the electrification was shut off. That would last a quarter hour. If they missed —well, they'd be shut in the city again for another twenty-four hours. Nice people, Metropolitan Safaris. Nicer customers, the Rachens. Gilmore spat.

Gradually the sun lost its balance and tipped down the western sky. Shadows already stood high on the buildings. Then, with the artificial abruptness of the big city, darkness came. Lights went on along the avenues; but there were ugly pools of shadowed menace in too many places. Last through the night, Gilmore told himself, and make ready for the big rumble that was due at dawn. Now, he didn't in the least feel like a hunted animal. When they dined in style at an automat, sitting crosslegged, concealed behind a change booth, the idea of an alien stalking him with a .280 rifle seemed absurd.

Until he moved his arm and caught the twinge from the gash. And until he saw that Trina's leg was causing her pain. The eerie quality of unnaturalness of the empty city gripped him by the throat then and he hated every part of the Rachens and what they had done to the world.

"Well, Buster," Trina broke in upon his thoughts. "What plans has the mastermind for tonight? Watch and watch, I suppose?"

"That sounds fair. I've been considering a good place to hole up. An elevator stuck between floors. How's that sound?"

"Fine." Trina's eyes shone. "That gives us a chance to rest."

"We're going to need it. They'll be waiting with everything they've got for us to break for the wire. That's when they get their big kick. That's really living!"

"Yeah. They have themselves a big time. Bastards."

"Well—they're only lousy aliens. If we'd figured the angles on getting to the stars first, we might be sitting at the other end of some energy gun, waiting for the Rachens to break out like rabbits. Although—I doubt it."

"So do—" Trina began. She stopped, her face turning rigidly to stare down the street beyond the door. "Do you see them?" she whispered.

Gilmore stood up very quietly. He reached out and took the knife, then motioned the girl behind him. He could feel icy drops trickling down his spine. He wanted to be sick with his fear.

In the center of the street, sniffing and snuffling, came two creatures like animated heaps of garbage. Their red eys were wicked. They snorted and licked the paving stones. They stank.

"Drochumins," Trina said, her voice loathing.

"Hold still."

"Rachen bloodhounds," Trina chattered. "Following our scent. What chance do we stand now—"

Gilmore put his left hand across her mouth and nose and pressed. Then, walking as though on dodo eggs, he propelled her towards the elevator. They went in just as the leading Drochumin snuffled triumphantly into the automat. Gilmore thumbed the top-floor button. He watched the alien bloodhounds. The elevator did not move.

Gilmore stabbed the button again, mouthing curses. He was so afraid that it hurt.

The Drochumins slobbered across the floor. Gilmore's

nerve almost went. He almost hung onto the button too long. Then, his stomach churning, he whirled out the elevator door, dragging Trina, and raced away into the cavernous depths of the back section of the store. The two animals emitted a bestial squealing. They followed, their claws clicking.

The two men were dragged along on the leashes that were lengthy enough to allow the Drochumins to finish their ghastly business far enough away from their masters so the masters would not get sick. Even the Rachens had stomachs. Gilmore and Trina ran.

"Get in that alcove, Trina," Gilmore rapped. "And be still."

He waited, knife poised. He knew, even in that mad instant of fear-bolstered courage, that now was not the time to use the spurt gun. Even when he was facing two hunters and their blood-hungry dogs.

There was a better way.

In the tricky illumination which threw lazy pools of light and shade over the floor the cast had to be as near perfect as he could make it. It was vital that he hit flesh. He took a deep breath, held it, balanced the knife along his palm and wrist for a heartbeat and then flicked it towards the hunters. The knife turned over once and a trick of light sent a flash of electric fire from the blade. It hit. Gilmore saw the hilt above a welling redness in the first man's throat.

Instantly the two Drochumins went mad. The scent of blood inflamed them to murderous fury. They leaped back on the leashes, began to tear the knifed man to pieces. His companion tried to intervene, got blood on his arm, and was included in the massacre.

GILMORE and Trina vanished into the shadows. They came out onto the street, to gulp at the cool night air.

"That was smart, Dirk," Trina said.

"An oldie." The fear was dying now, the suffocating sense of a hand at his throat. He wiped sweat from his forehead with a finger. "They must be tiring of the game, or we've thrown them too well today. They wouldn't use Drochumins otherwise."

"It's the Prince, you can bet your fifty thousand on that. I heard that if he succeeds his father on Mars he'll stir up a few changes that'll rebound on Earth. You know, the usual Rachen politics." Trina's face

was sombre in the harsh artificial lighting of the avenue. "Dirty politics, just like ours."

They cut off at the first street, and Gilmore wondered if, just outside the edge of vision, Rachen hunters watched their tracers tell where the hunted pair was. It was not a comforting picture. Then he absorbed what Trina had been saying and wondered afresh at her knowledge of worldly things he had hitherto regarded as the prerogative of men. He said: "What do you know about politics?"

"Enough," Trina said calmly. "Enough to steer clear of them. Had an uncle once who dabbled. Learned quite a bit from him. Like this Prince Dar-Lesseps set-up, for instance. If the Prince doesn't succeed to Mars, it will make a hell of a difference to Earth. The picture has been building up for the past ten years."

"Sounds vague to me," Gilmore said.

"Maybe. It isn't important to us, anyway. We've only one interest in the Prince."

"That's right." Gilmore hesitated. Should he tell Trina about the spurt gun? About Hammond? Something evil in the back of his mind urged him to remain silent. Later, he told himself.

A momentary vision came to him of the drama being enacted in this ghost city. A man and a woman, running like animals, hunted by small, grim parties of men and aliens, through the cavernous streets and avenues of this sprawling, deserted city. Looking at it like that, with a calm, detached, almost professional eye, the set-up was loaded with possibilities. And, from what Trina had said, it was now certain that someone wanted the leader of the hunters killed off. It had needed her casual statement to bring home to him that what went on in this segment of the world, apparently cut off and with no possible influence on the remainder, was in reality of vital importance.

The thought came that they might, here and now, be deciding future history.

He shrugged that off, forced his mind to grapple with the immediate problem. They had most of the night before them and they had to find a place where they could rest. He didn't feel tired, yet; but he knew that he couldn't expect to chase all over a city all day without some fatigue. That was where the hunters scored. In all probability the Prince hadn't even entered the arena.

They had been walking in the shadows of the pyramiding buildings with the stars overhead cut off at regular intervals as they walked under crosstown traffic ways. Looking up, Gilmore saw the stars dim, saw their frosty glitter fade. Clouds. Might be a storm. Surely, in a storm they would have a better chance to duck the killers?

Trina shivered.

"Blowing up for a storm," she said, her voice muted against the granite piles.

"Could be helpful."

"Hope the Prince gets his feet wet and catches his death of cold," Trina said vindictively.

From such a small, inconsequentially petty remark grew, Gilmore realized in a flash of insight, the basis for a complete understanding between them. His fears that Trina might be an agent for the Rachens were dispelled. He felt the consuming need to talk to her, trust her, unburden himself of the cloying miseries that had fouled up his life and eventually brought him here, into the arena of death. And not just because of her remark; that was merely the catalyst that stirred his emotions into high.

He took her arm, feeling the flesh soft yet firm under the dark shirt, and guided her into the archway guarding the next building they passed. In faint light that seeped from scattered tubes, she looked at him, incipient surprise drawing up her eyebrows and rounding her eyes.

"Okay, Trina," he said harshly. "Let's lay out our cards. What interest have you got in the Prince, in this setup—why did you volunteer for Metropolitan Safaris?"

She had composed herself, he saw with a twinge of annoyance. Any chance there might have been to catch her off balance had gone.

She said: "I told you, Buster. The usual reasons a girl does things her mother wouldn't approve. And as for the Prince, it so happens that my uncle—of whom you may have heard me speak—told me the score. The boy's bad medicine for Earth. His death won't solve anything dramatic, but will at least prevent Earth being even more sold down the drain. Follow? Or is all this heavy cranial stuff too much for your pea-sized brain?"

For answer Gilmore took the spurt gun slowly from his pocket.

TRINA said: "Oh!"

Gilmore said: "Hammond

gave me this. You know, Fatso's aide. Any ideas why?"

Thunder rolled somewhere shockingly. Gilmore glanced up from Trina's face, bemused. He saw that they were in the vaulting space of a railroad station.

"I might have good guesses," Trina said. "Such as Hammond isn't such a snake as we thought. He knows the score. He wants the Prince Dar-Lesseps out of the way. Who do you say Hammond was working for, Buster?"

"But that isn't possible!" Gilmore was profoundly moved at being forced to face the fact that he had been wrong. Just being wrong didn't matter much, if you straightened things out; but to re-orient your way of thinking—that was upsetting.

"It must be possible." Trina was matter-of-fact.

"There is an Underground, then. Earth is still fighting."

"Seems like it."

"You knew about this before." Gilmore said that with sudden conviction.

"Sure. Only I didn't know Hammond was in on the deal."

Gilmore said slowly: "He tried to buy me off. When I didn't play he trained me, turned me into an efficient hunter—and gave me a gun. Yes," he finished with steel spikes sticking out of his voice. "Hammond wants the Prince killed."

"So?"

Gilmore laughed. "So I do my damndest to kill the rat! Easy. Come on, Baby, let's go!"

He bustled her out of the station between the flanking columns. His mind was inflamed. Head for the wire fence, wait—the Prince would show up. Blam! Blam! Blam! Out and away. Safe. And all those lovely greenbacks . . .

He didn't even think of Jimmy until afterwards.

Out on the street, Trina said: "What's the time?"

"One-thirty."

"Five hours."

Rain drops hit the paving stones. They sizzled against still warm walls and rapidly turned into miniature rivers. Gilmore exulted in the coolness against his fevered skin. Trina was staring up the road. She nudged him and, coldly, said: "Take it easy, Superman. The hoods are around."

Gilmore saw the taxi sleeting water away in a shining wake under the lights. It stopped, the motor whining patiently. Sheltering in the shadows under the Terminal arch they saw men get out,

stand to peer at their tracers, begin to walk unhurriedly towards them.

"Inside." Gilmore spat the word, frustration tearing him.

"Take it easy, Dirk," Trina spoke sharply, concern in her voice.

"I'm okay, Trina. We must shake these boys, get out to the wire."

"This might be the final one. They might mean it, this time."

"So they mean it. We'll make out."

Back inside the terminal, Gilmore headed through a gate to the darkened platform beside a northbound track. He found an air ventilator, with warm air pumping up from the subway cooling system beneath. He fished out two cigarettes, lit them up, and laid them carefully above the grating.

"What—oh, I see." Trina's eyes shone. "Clever guy."

Gilmore wasted no breath on replying. At his insistent pressure they ran softly towards the entrance, hunkered behind the dim bulk of a vending machine. He watched, his brain icy, as four men came into the cavernous platform section. This close, they were inside the tracer range. The four men paused.

One said: "There they are. Smoking. What is this, anyway—"

Gilmore caught the stench of the others as one answered.

"We will decide. Close up on them. Quietly."

Rachens! Gilmore's flesh went goose-pimpled. He waited, breathing with carefully controlled rhythm, until the hunters had passed into the building. Trina stirred softly. They stood up, walked silently out and down. Gilmore was sweating and the sweat ran with the rain to cover his body with a slick film of water. His mouth was parched.

This time running away was different. This time he was bypassing those fools who were busily stalking two cigarettes back there, with his every sense strained on reaching and attacking the chief enemy. The hunter was now the hunted—although as yet he didn't know it.

THEY were about to climb into the cab when another cruised silently past. Gilmore waved it down. He lifted the hood of the cab in which the hunters had arrived and did rapid things with the wiring. Beamed central power, coming in over the pick-up aerial, normally was fed by trans-

former to the electric motor. Gilmore knew quite a bit about power beam engineering, and quite a bit more about the guts of motors. He straightened up, a nasty smile on his face, and bundled Trina into the second cab.

The cab sloshed through the rain.

Even then he wasn't prepared to believe they had gotten away with it. The sickening sense of failure wrenched at him as bullets hammered into the car body. Trina cried out, quick and high. A window disappeared in a smother of glass splinters. A ricochet made a frantic screaming.

The slug that hit Gilmore seemed, at first, merely an extension of his own thoughts. When the bullet smashed into his shoulder he didn't feel anything beyond a growing numbness. The pain would come later.

Trina peered excitedly through the rear window. Gilmore reached over with his right hand and yanked her down.

"But—" she began.

"Wanna get killed?" he snarled. Then he realized the ludicrousness of the question. Trina knew what she was doing. He knew now, in this instant of terror in the rain, that she was the sort of girl Jimmy should have had for a mother.

The interior of the cab was lit briefly by a lurid glow. Orange fire reflected from every piece of chrome. The explosion almost lifted the cab forward. The engine whined. There was a smell of burning rubber in the air, caught and held to earth by the blanket of the rain.

"They bought that one," Gilmore grunted.

"Booby trap. Now what?" Trina faced forward, bumped against Gilmore's arm. A groan he could not prevent welled past stiff lips.

"You big ape," Trina said hotly. "Why didn't you tell me you were hit?"

He submitted to the urgent probing of her fingers as the cab tore through the rain-dark streets, wincing as the tires screamed around corners and threw them against the upholstery. There was a tearing sound, and presently bandages were wrapped around the wound.

"You're lucky, Buster." Trina used the word Buster now in an entirely different way. "High velocity, clean. Right through. I've stopped the bleeding. If you don't get infected, you'll do okay."

"Thanks, Trina. You're a good egg."

"Why. Say. Thanks."

But for all her sarcasm, Gilmore sensed the warm glow of appreciation that went through her. That was the trouble with this world. People took each other for granted, never had time to say what they really thought.

The cab lurched over a grade road and stopped. They got out. Wind and rain tore at them. Up ahead the rain was sizzling in violent pyrotechnics from the fence and already a brown muddy river had formed to flow gurgling alongside the road.

Trina swore as the wind whipped her shirt out her pants. Gilmore saw that the tail was missing. Bandages. Together, they scuttled into the storm-drenched darkness, above them the thrashing tempest of waving branches. It was very dark. They waited a long while. After a time, somehow, Trina was in his arms, her skin cool and damp against his. The storm built up, tension flowing like thickened cream in the atmosphere, the vibrations of unseen things around them, hemming them in, compelling them to seek security in each other.

When the first searchlight shrieked through the blackness, sweeping back and forth like the lolling tongue of a bloodhound, Gilmore felt nothing at all. He raised himself on an elbow and knuckled water from his eyes. The warm green smell of wet earth was everywhere. Mingled with that Earthly scent was the familiar yet horribly alient tang of Rachen.

"They're near," Trina whispered.

"Lost us on their tracers. Must be within fifty yards."

"What time is it?"

Gilmore checked his watch. "The hell!" he said, shocked.

"What time is it?"

"Six o'clock."

"God! We've got to work this smart."

"If we can get out without tangling with the Prince—"

"No, Dirk. No good." Trina's voice was hard. "That's our job. That's why we're here. We represent everybody on Earth who hates and loathes the Rachens. We have to do their job. It's our pigeon, whether we want it or not."

"I'm not sure I do—now. I want out, with you, and Jimmy—"

"If you fail Earth, Dirk, you'll never have me." He could see her eyes, and knew she meant it. "Oh, sure, I know it sounds corny. Heroics. But, Dirk, I mean it."

"But—"

"Whenever a war is fought someone gets the sticky end. There's always got to be some guys stupid enough to be up front. This time it's us, you and me."

"Why me? Why? Hell, just when there is a chance that I can get back my self-respect, go into the world again, start over. The money will do that —yours and mine. We can live our lives out in comfort without worrying about Rachens, or—"

"Sorry, Buster. You lose." Trina pointed. Over their heads the searchlights had been beating a crossword puzzle against the darkness. Now that darkness was lightening, the storm-retarded dawn was climbing wearily to survey its new day. "They are here."

And, following the girl's pointing finger, Gilmore saw that they were.

MEN and Rachens, fanning out, carrying their guns as though on a rabbit hunt, when the wheat has been cut down to a solitary island in the center of the field. Gilmore peered through narrowed eyes, weighing, sizing, deliberating. He couldn't see the Prince.

He had made up his mind. He would avoid this lot in front, skulk inside their tracer range through the skirts of the storm, and break for the gate. His watch said six-twenty. Time enough.

The men made a great semi-circle between him and the city. In front the wire fence stretched, bleak and watchful—and yet supremely beckoning. His mind ran on. Of course, if the Prince got in the way—his hand reached for the spurt gun.

He went rigid.

The spurt gun was gone.

"I thought you were a man, Buster." Trina's voice was quite calm and controlled; yet it carried overtones of contempt such as Gilmore had never known could exist.

"I'm getting out," Gilmore said sullenly.

"Sure—after we settle with the Prince."

Sharp, nerve-fibrilating reports rang out in the dawn stillness. A few isolated birds wheeled up across the misty haze over the sun, their cries croaking and discordant. The rifles spat again. Bullets smacked wetly into the mud. Gilmore felt a tremble go through his legs, up his thighs, engulf his entire body. And he'd forgotten how to tremble.

Like hell he had.

Trina was lying on her

stomach, shirt all mud-splattered, her lips drawn back over white teeth. Panic gibbered at Gilmore. He saw over Trina's crew-cut hair the advancing Rachens, could almost see the grins of anticipatory lust on their faces.

This shouldn't be. This was no way to die!

Trina looked back, once, and then turned her head away. She said: "Jimmy will be looked after. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Something in Gilmore almost broke—but not quite. Something he didn't know he possessed, something that all the tough talk in the world couldn't hide, stood up straight and proud.

He lay down beside Trina. He said: "You said it was corny, Trina. And it is. But —I'm an Earthman."

"Dirk!"

"Go on," he said bitterly. "Laugh. Tell me what a goddam sucker I am. You would mention Jimmy. All right, you clever bitch, you. I'll show you how to die."

Trina didn't answer, snuggled the spurt gun closer.

"What's the matter?" Gilmore shouted. "You deaf, or something? I said I'd go along with you. Are you satisfied now? Isn't that what you want?"

The leading figures were waving. Gilmore twisted his head. Other Rachens rose from the wire, where they had been sitting all the time. He swore.

"Why, the dirty, double-crossing— Look, there's the Prince. Waiting for us to run for it. The swine. Well, we've spoiled his game."

Trina aimed the spurt gun. They pressed their faces into the mud.

Mud splashes began to shower them. Bullets cut above them. Gilmore knew that he would never have made it to the wire. Now all that mattered was the Prince. And that fine gentleman was hanging back, taking potshots with his shiny .280 magazine rifle.

"Hey!" Gilmore yelled, suddenly tremendously angry. "Hey, you stinking Rachen. Come on and get us. You alien monster, you! Baby-eater!" He began methodically to categorise all the filth that would upset a Rachen. The rifles answered almost hysterically. The fold in the mud saved them. They could not be hit from that angle.

"They must come closer," Trina said. Her mouth was pale, her cheeks flushed. The spurt gun was as steady as the city's foundations.

"All right, you scheming minx! All *right*! So I'm a failure. So I'm no good." Gilmore grabbed her in his arms, kissed her, feeling the rain and mud on her face. "So, okay. I'm no good. You got me into this situation, you jockeyed me into the dying business. So okay. I'll die."

Trina said: "What are you waiting for, Buster?"

"My God," Gilmore said, aghast. "You got no heart at all?"

"Hurry up! I'm hit! I'll bleed to death before you quit your heroics. *Move!*"

"Trina!"

"Do it, Dirk. Draw them. But hurry. Hurry!"

"Oh, Trina! God! God!" Gilmore began to shout and rave, to pray and curse. But he stood up, a shambling, filthy wreck, with blood-caked rags swathing his shoulders, and began to run. He ran frenziedly, waving his arms. His eyes were glazed. "Trina! Jimmy!"

BULLETS cut him to pieces. As he fell, with the sardonic face of the Prince rising to stand over him, with no feeling at all in his body, he wanted one thing before he died.

That one thing was vouchsafed him.

Lying like that, his head twisted up, glaring into the brightness of the new day, with the ugly blob of the alien's head cutting a harsh silhouette, he saw the Prince stiffen. Saw the incredible look of horror, surprise, agony on that star-spawned face.

Then, bisected by the spurt gun, the Prince's body fell on Gilmore. That dead alien would never rule Mars—or Earth.

As blackness, followed by supernal radiance, engulfed him, he was conscious of a regret for unfinished business. He never would collect that extra fifty thousand dollars.

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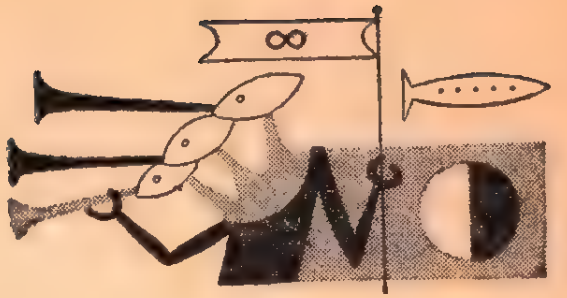

THE MURKY WAY

by DEAN A. GRENNELL

Whenever something of suitable quality can be found, Infinity *will reprint an item from a "fanzine"—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. "The Murky Way" is a regular column which appears in* Dimensions, *published by Harlan Ellison, Apt.* 3D, 611 *W.* 114*th St., New York, N. Y. Mr. Ellison will send complete information about his magazine, including subscription rates, upon request.*

"SUCH THINGS as flying saucers exist," we are told, "and here are photographs to prove it!"

Well, it is not the object of this article to debunk flying saucers. That is old hat. It's been done. What's more, I am by no means certain that the phenomenon loosely referred to as "flying saucers" or UFO does *not* have some basis of incidents which have not been satisfactorily explained. For one thing, there have been people whose word I accept implicitly, who claim to have seen "something."

So I plod along, keeping my mind open to wind and weather on this matter of airborne crockery. But I can tell you this: nothing fortifies my very considerable stock of native skepticism like these "actual photographs" of flying Spode which seem to be unctuously published almost anywhere you happen to look these days.

I've been keeping a spare eye peeled for potential saucer-photo subjects and I've found various things about the house around which I could construct every bit as convincing a photo of a UFO as any I've yet seen. There's a dome-shaped gizmo done in metallic plastic which Jean has, to go inside some sort of

flower vase, for example. Paint a couple of portholes on it in black model airplane dope and you'd have a fairly credible scale-model disc-type spaceship.

I respectfully submit that I could take that plastic whatsit, paint the aforesaid portholes on it, take it out into the yard and suspend it with a couple of yards of pale-gray sewing thread from the end of a fishpole, against the sky with a few trees showing along the lower edge of the picture, aim the Speed Graphic at it and—this is extremely important—*rack the lens about 3/8" out of focus* and with very little other effort I could come up with an "actual photo of a flying saucer" which would be every bit as convincing as any I've seen.

That's the key: out of focus. I have yet to see a single picture of an FS which was even tolerably *close* to being in focus. If you want my theory on why this should be, I would say that if the focus had been any better, the strings would have showed up.

I'm sure you're familiar with those little photo-puzzles where they show you a bunch of shots of common objects greatly magnified and challenge you to guess what they are—the heads of a bunch of matches, a cross-section of celery-stalk, bristles of a toothbrush or whatever. I have seen one "flying saucer photo" which—to my eye—was palpably, pitifully plainly, nothing but a round polka-dot on a rug, shot from slaunchwise, out of focus, with a truly astonishing amount of film-grain in evidence.

What do you want?—a formation of light-colored objects streaking across the sky? *Beaucoup* simple. Merely shoot a negative of the sky . . . use a filter to bring out some nice, convincing-looking clouds. Then you can either expose the "shining objects" onto the original negative before you develop it—a very simple operation—or you can dodge them onto the print in the process of enlarging it.

You want cigar-shaped ships or disc-shaped ships (now *there's* a twung tister!) shot in full flight? Get one of the local model-airplane builders to fashion you a good model on the QT, suspend it from a thread of the right color to blend with the sky and fire away. For variety, try having someone stand behind you and throw them over your shoulder. Don't bother to set the shutter-speed up.

The more blur there is to your picture, the more authentic it will look.

That figures, you know. If anyone comments on what a botchy job of photography you've done, you will automatically say, "Yeah, but you see, I'm not a *professional* photographer and I got so excited when I seen that ole thing whizzin' around up there . . ." They will understand and forgive you. What is more important, they will believe you, just as they have others.

And while you're at it, why not cap things off good and proper with an actual photo of a flying-saucer man? How? Childishly, incredibobbly easy. Find a friend—get a tall, thin one if you can—and deck him out in a suit of red woolen underwear. Sling a Sam Browne belt—white if you can get it—across his shoulder, hang a canteen, binocular case or whatever is handy on the belt, get him out on some flat, open ground, get back about fifty feet or better and have him turn and start trotting away from you. Then take your camera—say, for example, a Kodak Duaflex, loaded with cheap, outdated, war-surplus film—and "pan" it rapidly (swinging as you shoot) and take a picture of him. If you have followed all the instructions properly, you should come up with a photo of what is barely recognizable as some sort of erect biped dressed in something besides a Brooks Brothers suit.

I almost forgot . . . If you develop your own film, set aside the Microdol for the time being and develop it in straight D-72, heated to around 82° F. Dunk it promptly in cold water to get a nice crinkly negative reticulation, drag it across the floor to pick up a spot or two of grit, lint and dust, dry it over a hot stove, get your hands good and sweaty and grab it firmly in two or three places with your thumb and forefinger to get some good solid fingerprints on the negative.

Or save yourself all this trouble and send it to any drugstore, where this sort of processing is standard procedure. A negative you get this way can then be enlarged and passed off as an actual photo of a saucer pilot. You can say, "And he had this big ship, hovering just off the ground with a humming noise and it was just barely off the picture to the right." Or left, as you choose. Your only limit is your own imagination. Remember that—it's terribly important. ∞ ∞

If you discovered a fantastic power like this, you'd use it benevolently, for the good of the entire human race— wouldn't you? Sure you would!

a likely story

by DAMON KNIGHT

THAT WAS the damnedest December I ever saw in New York. Whatever the weather is, Manhattan *always* gets the worst of it—frying hot in summer, snow or slush up to your ankles in winter—and all along the seaboard, it was a mean season. Coming in from Pennsylvania the day before, we'd been held up twice while the tracks were cleared. But when I stepped out of the hotel that night, the Saturday after Christmas, it was like a mild October; the air was just cool, with a fresh hint of snow in it. There was a little slush in the gutters, not much; the pavements were dry.

I was late, or I would have gone back and ditched the rubbers; I hate the foolish things to begin with, one reason I moved to the country—out there, I wear house slippers half the year, galoshes the rest; there's no in-between. I took off my gloves, opened my scarf, and breathed deep lungfuls while I walked to the corner for a cab. I began to wonder if it had been smart to move 90 miles out of town just because I didn't like rubbers.

The streets didn't seem overcrowded. I got a cab without any trouble. Nobody was hurrying; it was as if the whole population was sitting peacefully at home or in some bar, in no rush to be anywhere else.

"Listen," I said to the cabbie, "this is still New York, isn't it?"

He jerked his chin at me. "Hah?"

"Where's the crowds?" I said. "Where's the rotten weather? What happened?"

He nodded. "I know whatcha mean. Sure is funny. Crazy weather."

"Well, when did this happen?"

"Hah?"

"I said, how long has this been going on?"

"Cleared up about three o'clock. I looked out the winda, and the sun was shinin'. Jeez! You know what I think?"

"You think it's them atom bombs," I told him.

"That's right. You know what I think, I think it's them *atom* bombs." He pulled up opposite a canopy and folded down his flag.

In the lobby, I found an arrow-shaped sign that said, "MEDUSA CLUB."

The Medusa Club is, loosely speaking, an association for professional science fiction writers. No two of them will agree on what science fiction is—or on anything else—but

WARNING TO NEW WRITERS: *Early in your career (it always happens), you'll be tempted to write a story in which the characters are writers and —possibly—editors. Don't do it! Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it won't be funny, or even interesting, to readers. Occasionally, of course, someone does it well; but it takes someone with tremendous talent and experience, someone who can combine the best of science fiction and detective puzzle-stories with a generous salting of sparkling humor—someone, that is, like Damon Knight.*

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they all write it, or have written it, or pretend they can write it, or something. They have three kinds of meetings, or two and a half. One is for club politics, one is for drinking, and the third is also for drinking, only more so. As a rule, they meet in people's apartments, usually Preacher Flatt's or Ray Alvarez', but every year at this time they rent a hotel ballroom and throw a whingding. I'm a member in bad standing; the last time I paid my dues was in 1950.

Rod Pfehl (the P is silent, as in Psmith) was standing in the doorway, drunk, with a wad of dollar bills in his hand. "I'm the treasurer," he said happily. "Gimme." Either he was the treasurer, or he had conned a lot of people into thinking so. I paid him and started zigzagging slowly across the floor, trading hellos, looking for liquor.

Tom Q. Jones went by in a hurry, carrying a big camera. That was unusual; Tom Q. is head components designer for a leading radio-TV manufacturer, and has sold, I guess, about two million words of science fiction, but this was the first time I had ever seen him in motion, or with anything but a highball in his hand. I spotted Punchy Carrol, nut-brown in a red dress; and Duchamp biting his pipe; and Leigh MacKean with her pale protoNordic face, as wistful and fey as the White Knight's; and there was a fan named Harry Somebody, nervously adjusting his hornrims as he peered across the room; and, this being the Christmas Party, there were a lot of the strangest faces on earth.

Most of them were probably friends of friends, but you never knew; one time there had been a quiet banker-type man at a Medusa meeting, sitting in a corner and not saying much, who turned out to be Dorrance Canning, an old idol of mine; he wrote the "Woman Who Slept" series

and other gorgeous stuff before I was out of knee pants.

There were two blue-jacketed bartenders, and the drinks were eighty-five cents. Another reason I moved to the country is that the amusements are cheaper. Nursing my collins, I steered around two broad rumps in flounced satin and ran into Tom Q. He snapped a flashbulb in my face, chortled something, and went away while I was still dazzled. Somebody else with a lemon-colored spot for a head shook my left hand and muttered at me, but I wasn't listening; I had just figured out that what Tom had said, was, "There's no *film* in it!"

SOMEBODY fell down on the waxed floor; there was a little flurry of screams and laughter. I found myself being joggled, and managed to put away an inch of the collins to save it. Then I thought I saw Art Greymbergen, my favorite publisher, but before I could get anywhere near him Carrol's clear Sunday-school voice began calling, "The program is about to begin—please take your seats!" and a moment later people were moving sluggishly through the bar archway.

I looked at my watch, then hauled out my copy of the little mimeographed sheet, full of earnest jocularity, that the club sent out every year to announce the Party. It said that the program would begin somewhere around 10, and it was that now.

This was impossible. The program always pivoted on Bill Plass, and Bill never got there, or anywhere, until the party was due to break up.

But I looked when I got down near the bandstand, and by God there he was, half as large as life, gesturing, flashing his Charlie Chaplin grin, teetering like a nervous firewalker. He saw me and waved hello, and then went on talking to Asa Akimisov, Ph.D. (A-K-I-M-I-S-O-V, please, and never mind the Akimesian, or Akimsiov.)

Maybe it *was* them atom bombs. I found a vacant folding chair with a good view of the platform, and a better one of a striking brunette in blue. Akimisov got up on the platform, with his neck sticking out of his collar like a potted palm (he had lost forty pounds, again) and began telling jokes. Ace is the second funniest man in Medusa, the first being Plass; the peculiar thing is that Plass writes humor professionally, and delivers his annual set-pieces the same way—the rest

of the time he is merely a perfectly fascinating morbid wit—but Akimisov, who writes nothing but the most heavily thoughtful fiction in the business, bubbles with humor all the time, a poor man's Sam Levenson. I was going to write an article once proving that a writer's personality on paper was his real one turned inside out, but I fell afoul of some exceptions. Like Tom Q., who was still flashing his bulbs over at the side of the platform, and being noisily suppressed—you could paper him all over with his published stories, and never know the difference.

The program was good, even for Medusa. Ned Burgeon, wearing a sky-blue dinner jacket and a pepper-and-salt goatee, played his famous twenty-one-string guitar; a dark-haired girl, a new one to me, sang in a sweet, strong contralto; there was a skit involving Punchy Carrol as a dream-beast, L. Vague Duchamp as a bewildered spaceman, and B. U. Jadrys, the All-Lithuanian Boy, as a ticket agent for the Long Island Railroad. Then came Plass's annual monologue, and there is just nothing like those. I'm not exaggerating out of parochial pride (once a year is enough Medusa for

me) : the simple truth is that Plass is a comic genius.

He had his audience laid out flat, gasping and clutching its sides. Why should a man like that waste his time writing fiction?

Toward the end he paused, looked up from his notes, and ad-libbed a biting but not very funny wisecrack about—well, I'd better not say about what. A certain member in the audience stiffened and half got up, and there was a little embarrassed murmur under the laughter, but it was over in a minute. Bill looked flustered. He went back to his prepared speech, finished, and got a roar of applause.

I did my share, but I was worried. Bill can charm the rattles off a snake; if he wanted to go in for quack-doctoring, nut cultism or Canadian mining stock, let alone night-club comedy, he could be a millionaire. That

gaffe simply hadn't been like him, at all. Still, it was Bill's Dostoevskian soul that made him the funny man he was, and God only knew what had been happening to him in the year since I'd been in town . . .

Akimisov, as m.c., delivered the final words. He bowed, straightened, and his pants fell down.

In the dressing room, when I got back there, Bill was busy apologizing to the member on whose toes he had trodden—that apology would have soothed a tiger with a toothache — and Akimisov, with a bewildered expression, was holding up his pants. That was what I was curious about; it was another false note—I didn't think Ace would stoop that low for a laugh. The pants were too big for him, of course, but Ace had always struck me as the kind of guy who wears a belt *and* suspenders.

He did; but the tongue had come out of the belt-buckle, and all the suspenders buttons had popped, all at once. Scouts were being sent out to look for a belt that would fit.

I wandered out into the hall again. I was beginning to get a peculiar feeling on one drink. Too many fresh vegetables; I can't take it like I used to. So I went to the bar and got another.

When I came out, the brunette in the blue evening gown was standing near the doorway listening to Larry Bagsby. Next thing I knew, she let out a whoop, grabbed her bosom, and fetched Larry a good one on the ear. This was unfair. I was a witness, and Larry hadn't done a thing except look; her overworked shoulder straps had simply given way, like Akimisov's suspenders.

CURIOUSER and curiouser . . . The noises around me were picking up in volume and tempo, for all the world like a dancehall scene in a Western movie, just before somebody throws the first table. There was a thud and a screech off to my right; I gathered that somebody else had fallen down. Then a tinkle of bursting glass, and another little chorus of shouts, and then another thud. It went on like that. The crowd was on the move, in no particular direction; everybody was asking everybody else what was going on.

I felt the same way, so I went looking for Ray Alvarez; you can always count on him to tell you the answer, or make one up.

Tom Q. went by, flashing that camera, and it wasn't till the mob had swallowed him that I realized he wasn't replacing the bulb between shots—the same one was blazing over and over.

Well, a few years ago it was silly putty; the year before that, Diarrhetics. This year, everlasting flash bulbs —and no film in the camera.

Ned Burgeon passed me, his grin tilting his whiskers dangerously near the lighted stub in his cigarette holder; he was carrying the guitar case as if he were wading ashore with it. I saw Duchamp off to one side, talking to somebody, gesturing emphatically with his pipe.

It isn't so, but occasionally you get the impression that science fiction writers are either very tall or very short. I watched H. Drene Pfeiffer stilt by, Ray Bolgerish in an astonishing skin-tight suit of horseblanket plaid, followed by Will Kubatius and the *heldentenor* bulk of Don W. Gamble, Jr. I lowered my sights. Sandwiched between the giants there ought to have been half a dozen people I'd have been glad to see—if not Alvarez, then Bill Plass or his brother Horty; or Jerry Thaw; Bagsby; Preacher Flatt, who looks too much like a marmoset to be true . . . But no: down on those lower levels there was nobody but an eleven-year-old boy who had got in by mistake, and the ubiquitous fan, Harry *You*-Know, the one with the glasses and all that hair. I tacked, veering slightly, and beat across the room the other way.

There was another crash of glass, a *big* one, and a louder chorus of yells. It wasn't all automatic female shrieks, this time; I caught a couple of male voices, raised in unmistakable anger.

The crowd was thinning out a little; droves of friends of friends appeared to be heading for the coat room. Across one of the clear spaces came a pretty blonde, looking apprehensive. In a minute I saw why. Her skirt billowed out around her suddenly and she yelled, crouched, holding the cloth down with both hands, then sunfished away into the crowd. A moment later the same thing happened to a tall brown-haired girl over to my left.

That was too much. Glancing up, I happened to see the big cut-glass chandelier begin swaying gently from side to side, jingling faintly, working up momentum. I moved faster, buttonholing everyone

I knew: "Have you seen Ray? Have you seen Ray?"

I heard my name, and there he was, standing like stout Cortez atop the piano, where he could see the whole room like an anthill. I climbed up beside him. Alvarez, to quote Duchamp's description, is a small rumpled man with an air of sleepy good-nature. This is apt until you get close to him, when you discover he is about as sleepy as a hungry catamount. "Hi," he said, with a sidewise glance.

"Hi. What do you think's doing it?"

"It could be," said Ray, speaking firmly and rapidly, "a local discontinuity in the four-dimensional plenum that we're passing through. Or it could be poltergeists—that's perfectly possible, you know." He gave me a look, daring me to deny it.

"You think so?"

"It *could* be."

"By golly, I believe you're right," I said. This is the only way to handle Alvarez when he talks nonsense. If you give him the slightest degree of resistance, he will argue along the same line till doomsday, just to prove he can.

"Mmm," he said thoughtfully, screwing up his face. "No, I don't—think—so."

"No?"

"No," he said positively. "You notice how the thing seems to travel around the room?" He nodded to a fist fight that was breaking out a few yards from us, and then to a goosed girl leaping over by the bar entrance. "There's a kind of irregular rhythm to it." He moved his hand, illustrating. "One thing happens —then another thing—now here it comes around this way again—"

A fat friend of a friend and her husband backed up against the platform just below us, quivering. There was something wrong with my fingers; they felt warm. The collins glass was turning warm. Warm, *hell*—I yelped and dropped it, sucking my fingers. The glass looped and fell neatly on the flowered hat of the friend of a friend, and liquid splattered. The woman hooted like a peanut whistle. She whirled, slipped in the puddle and lurched off into the arms of a hairy authors' agent. Her husband dithered after her a couple of steps, then came back with blood in his eye. He got up as far as the piano stool when, as far as I could make out, his pants split up the back and he climbed down again, glaring and clutching himself.

"Now it's over in the

middle," said Ray imperturbably. "It *might* be poltergeists, I won't say it isn't. But I've got a hunch there's another answer, actually."

I said something dubious. A hotel-manager-looking kind of a man had just come in and was looking wildly around. Punchy Carrol went up to him, staring him respectfully right in the eye, talking a quiet six to his dozen. After a moment he gave up and listened. I've known Punchy ever since she was a puppy-eyed greenhorn from Philadelphia, and I don't underestimate her any more. I knew the manager-type would go away and not call any cops—at least for a while.

I glanced down at the floor, and then looked again. There were little flat chips of ice scattered in the wetness. That could have been from the ice cubes; but there was *frost* on some of the pieces of glass.

Hot on the bottom, cold on top!

"Ray," I said, "something's buzzing around in my mind. Maxwell's demon." I pointed to the frosted bits of glass. "That might— No, I'm wrong, that couldn't account for all these—"

He took it all in in one look. "Yes, it could!" he snapped. His cat-eyes gleamed at me. "Maxwell had the theory of the perfect heat pump—it would work if you could only find a so-called demon, about the size of a molecule, that would bat all the hot molecules one way, and all the cold ones the other."

"I know," I said. "But—"

"Okay, I'm just explaining it to you."

What he told me was what I was thinking: Our unidentified friend had some way of changing probability levels. I mean, all the molecules of air under a woman's skirt *could* suddenly decide to move in the same direction—or all the molecules in a patch of flooring *could* lose their surface friction—it just wasn't likely. If you could *make* it likely—there wasn't any limit. You could make honest dice turn up a thousand sevens in a row. You could run a car without an engine; make rain or fair weather; reduce the crime index to zero; keep a demagogue from getting re-elected . . .

Well, if all that was true, I wanted in. And I didn't have the ghost of a chance—I was out of touch; I didn't know anybody. Ray knew everybody.

"SPREAD out, folks!" said a bullhorn voice. It was Samwitz, of course, standing on a bench at the far wall. Kosmo Samwitz, the Flushing Nightingale; not one of the Medusa crowd, usually—a nice enough guy, and a hard-working committeeman, but the ordinary Manhattan meeting hall isn't big enough to hold his voice. "Spread out—make an equal distance between you. That way we can't get into any fights." People started following his orders, partly because they made sense, partly because, otherwise, he'd go on bellowing.

"That's good—that's good," said Samwitz. "All right, this meeting is hereby called to order. The chair will entertain suggestions about what the nature of these here phenomenon are. . . ."

Ray showed signs of wanting to get down and join the caucus; he loves parliamentary procedure better than life itself; so I said hastily, "Let's get down with the crowd, Ray. We can't see much better up here, anyway."

He stiffened. "You go if you want to," he said quietly. "I'm staying here, where I can keep an eye on things."

The chandelier was now describing stately circles, causing a good deal of ducking and confusion, but the meeting was getting on with its business, namely, arguing about whether to confirm Kosmo by acclamation or nominate and elect a chairman in the usual way. That subject, I figured, was good for at least twenty minutes. I said, "Ray, will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?"

"Maybe." He grinned.

"Are you doing this?"

He threw his head back and chuckled. "No-o, I'm not doing it." He looked at me shrewdly, still grinning. "Is that why you were looking for me?"

I admitted it humbly. "It was just a foolish idea," I said. "Nobody we know could possibly—"

"*I* don't know about that," he said, squinting thoughtfully.

"Ah, come on, Ray."

He was affronted. "Why not? We've got some pretty good scientific brains in Medusa, you know. There's Gamble — he's an atomic physicist. There's Don Bierce; there's Duchamp; there's—"

"I know," I said, "I know, but where would any of them have got hold of a thing like *this?*"

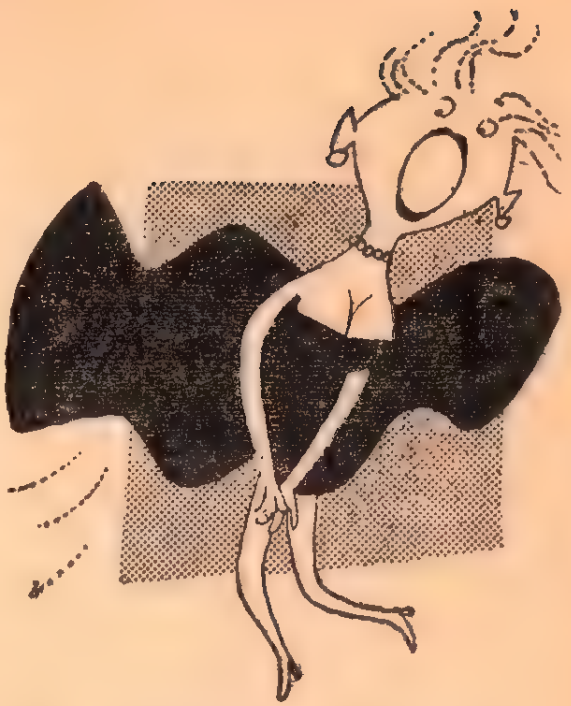
"They could have invented it," he said stoutly.

"You mean like Balmer and Phog Relapse running the Michelson experiment in their cellar, and making it come out that there *is* an ether drift, only it's *down?*"

He bristled. "No, I certainly don't—"

"Or like Lobbard discovering Scatiology?"

"Ptah! No! Like Watt, like Edison,, Galileo—" He thumbed down three fingers emphatically. "—Goodyear, Morse, Whitney—"



Down below, the meeting had taken less than five minutes to confirm Samwitz as chairman. I think the chandelier helped; they ought to install one of those in every parliamentary chamber.

The chair recognized Punchy, who said sweetly that the first order of business ought to be to get opinions from the people who knew something, beginning with Werner Kley.

Werner accordingly made a very charming speech, full of Teutonic rumbles, the essence of which was that he didn't know any more about this than a rabbit. He suggested, however, that pictures should be taken. There was a chorus of "Tom!" and Jones staggered forward with his war-cry: "There isn't any *film* in it!"

Somebody was dispatched to get film; somebody else trotted out to telephone for reporters and cameramen, and three or four other people headed in a businesslike way for the men's room.

Ray was simultaneously trying to get the chair's attention and explaining to me, in staccato asides, how many epochal inventions had been made by amateurs in attic workshops. I said—and this was really bothering me—"But look: do you see anybody with any kind of a gadget? How's he going to hide it? How's he going to focus it, or whatever?"

Ray snorted. "It might be hidden in almost anything.

Burgeon's guitar—Gamble's briefcase— Mr. Chairman!"

Duchamp was talking, but I could feel it in my bones that Samwitz was going to get around to Ray next. I leaned closer. "Ray, listen—a thing like this—they wouldn't keep it to themselves, would they?"

"Why not? Wouldn't you—for a while, anyway?" He gave me his bobcat grin. "I can think of quite—a—few things I could do, if I had it."

So could I; that was the whole point. I said, "Yeah. I was hoping we could spot him, before the crowd does." I sighed. "Fat chance, I suppose."

He gave me another sidelong look. "That shouldn't be so hard," he drawled.

"You *know* who it is?"

He put on his most infuriating grin, peering to see how I took it. "I've, got, a few, ideas."

"Who?"

Wrong question. He shook his head with a that-would-be-telling look.

Somebody across the room went down with a crash; then somebody else. "Sit on the floor!" Ray shouted, and they all did it, squatting cautiously like old ladies at a picnic. The meeting gathered speed again.

I looked apprehensively at the narrow piano top we were standing on, and sat down with my legs hanging over. Ray stayed where he was, defying the elements to do their worst.

"You know, all right," I said, looking up at him, "but you're keeping it to yourself." I shrugged. "Well, why shouldn't you?"

"O-kay," he said goodnaturedly. "Let's figure it out. Where were you when it started?"

"In the bar."

"Who else was there? Try to remember exact-ly."

I thought. "Art Greymbergen. Fred Balester. Gamble was there—"

"Okay, that eliminates him—and you, incidentally—because it started in here. Right, so far?"

"Right!"

"Hmmm. Something happened *to* Akimisov."

"And Plass—that booboo he made?"

Ray dismissed Plass with a gesture. He was looking a little restive; another debate was under way down below, with Punchy and Leigh MacKean vociferously presenting the case for psychokinesis, and being expertly heckled by owlish little M. C. (Hotfoot) Burncloth's echo-cham-

ber voice. "It's too much," I said quickly. "There's too many of them left. We'll never—"

"It's perfectly simple!" Ray said incisively. He counted on his fingers again. "Burgeon — Kley — Duchamp — Bierce — Burncloth — MacKean — Jibless. Eight people."

"One of the visitors?" I objected.

He shook his head. "I know who all these people are, generally," he said. "It's got to be one of those eight. I'll take Kley, Bierce, Jibless and MacKean—you watch the other four. Sooner or later they'll give themselves away."

I had *been* watching. I did it some more.

A WAVE of neck-clutching passed over the crowd. Cold breezes, I expect. Or hot ones, in some cases. Tom Jones leaped up with a cry and sat down again abruptly.

"Did you see anything?" Ray asked.

I shook my head. Where, I wondered, was the good old science-fiction cameraderie? If I'd been the lucky one, I would have let the crowd in—well, a few of them, anyway—given them jobs and palaces and things. Not that they would have been grateful, probably, the treacherous, undependable, neurotic bums. . . .

They were looking nervous now. There had been that little burst of activity after a long pause (even the chandelier seemed to be swinging slowly to rest), and now the —call it the stillness—was more than they could stand. I felt it, too: that building up of tension. Whoever it was, was getting tired of little things.

A horrible jangling welled out of Burgeon's guitar case; it sounded like a bull banjo with the heaves. Ned jumped, dropped his cigarette holder, got the case open and I guess put his hand on the strings; the noise stopped. That eliminated him . . . or did it?

Take it another way. What would the guy have to be like who would waste a marvel like this on schoolboy pranks at a Medusa Christmas party? Not Jibless, I thought—he abominates practical jokers. Bierce didn't seem to be the type, either, although you could never tell; the damnedest wry stories get hatched occasionally in that lean ecclesiastic skull. Duchamp was too staid (but was I sure?); MacKean was an enigma. Gamble? Just maybe. Burgeon? Jones? It could be

either, I thought, but I wasn't satisfied.

I glanced at Ray again, and mentally crossed him off for the second or third time. Ray's an honorable man, within his own complicated set of rules; he might mislead me, with pleasure, but he wouldn't give me the lie direct.

But I had the feeling that the answer was square in front of me, and I was blind to it.

The meeting was just now getting around to the idea that somebody present was responsible for all the nonsense. This shows you the trouble with committees.

A shocking idea hit me abruptly; I grabbed Ray by the coatsleeve. "Ray, this cockeyed weather—I just remembered. *Suppose it's local.*"

His eyes widened; he nodded reluctantly. Then he stiffened and snapped his fingers at somebody squatting just below us—the invisible fan, Harry Somebody. I hadn't even noticed him there, but it's Ray's business to know everything and keep track of everybody—that's why he's up on his hill.

The fan came over. Ray handed him something. "Here is some change, Harry—run out and call up the weather bureau. Find out whether this freak weather is local or not, and if it is, just where the boundaries are. Got that?"

Harry nodded and went out. He was back only a couple of minutes later. "I got the Weather Bureau all right. They say it's local—just Manhattan and Queens!"

Something snapped. I did a fast jig on the piano top, slipped and came crashing down over the keys, but I hardly noticed it. I got a death-grip on Ray's trouser leg. "Listen! If he can do that—he doesn't have to be in the same room. Doesn't Gamble live out in—"

There were cries of alarm over by the open courtyard window. The room was suddenly full of cats—brindle ones, black ones, tabbies, white ones with pink ribbons around their necks, lunatic Siamese.

After them came dogs: one indistinguishable wave of liquid leaping torsos, flying ears, gullets. In half a second the room was an incident written by Dante for the Mutascope.

I caught a glimpse of a terrier bounding after two cats who were climbing Samwitz' back; I saw Duchamp asprawl, pipe still in his mouth, partially submerged under a tidal eddy of black

and white. I saw Tom Q. rise up like a lighthouse, only to be bowled over by a frantically scrambling Leigh MacKean.

Ray touched my arm and pointed. Over by the far wall, his back against it, Gamble stood like a slightly potbound Viking. He was swinging that massive briefcase of his, knocking a flying cat or dog aside at every swipe. Two women had crawled into his lee for shelter; he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Then the briefcase burst. It didn't just come open; it flew apart like a comedy suitcase, scattering a whirlwind of manuscript paper, shirts, socks—and nothing else.

The tide rushed toward the window again: the last screech and the last howl funneled out. In the ringing silence, somebody giggled. I couldn't place it, and neither could Ray, I think—then. Stunned, I counted scratched noses.

Samwitz was nowhere in sight; the crowd had thinned a good deal, but all of the eight, thank heaven, were still there—MacKean sitting groggily on a stranger's lap, Werner Kley nursing a bloody nose, Tom Q., camera still dangling from his neck, crawling carefully on hands and knees toward the door. . . .

He reached it and disappeared. An instant later, we heard a full chorus of feminine screams from the lobby, and then the sound of an enormous J. Arthur Rank-type gong.

Ray and I looked at each other with a wild surmise. "*Tom* lives in Queens!" he said.

I scrambled down off the piano and the platform, but Ray was quicker. He darted into the crowd, using his elbows in short, efficient jabs. By the time I got to the door he was nowhere in sight.

The lobby was full of large powdery women in flowered dresses, one of them still shrieking. They slowed me down, and so did tripping over one of those big cylindrical jardinieres full of sand and snipes. I reached the street just in time to see Ray closing the door of a cab.

I hadn't the wind to shout. I saw his cheerful face and Tom's in the small yellow glow of the cab light; I saw Tom Q. raise the camera, and Ray put out his hand to it. Then the cab pulled away into traffic, and I watched its beady red tail lights down the avenue until they winked out of sight.

SOME time later, walking down the cold morning street, I discovered there was somebody with me, keeping step, not saying anything. It was Harry Er-Ah.

He saw I had noticed him. "Some party," he remarked.

I said yeah.

"That was pretty funny, what happened in the lobby."

"I didn't see it."

"He came tearing through there on all fours. Right into the middle of all those women. They probably thought he was a mad dog or something."

I took two more steps, and stopped, and looked at him. "That was *all* he did?" I said.

"Sure."

"Well, then," I said with mounting exasperation, "in the name of— Oh. Wait a minute. You're wrong," I told him, calming down again. "There was the gong. He made that gong noise."

"Did he?" said Harry. One nervous hand went up and adjusted the hornrims.

I felt a little tugging at my shirt front, and looked down to see my necktie slithering out. I swatted at it instinctively, but it ducked away and hovered, swaying like a cobra.

Then it dropped. He showed me his open hand, and there was a wire running up out of his sleeve, with a clip on the end of it. For the first time, I noticed two rings of metal wired behind the lens frames of his eyeglasses.

He pulled his other hand out of his pocket, and there was a little haywire rig in its batteries and a couple of tubes and three tuning knobs.

Fans, I was thinking frozenly—sixteen or eighteen, maybe, with pimples and dandruff and black fingernails, and that wonderful, terrible eagerness boiling up inside them . . . slaving away at backyard rocketry experiments, wiring up crazy gadgets that never worked, printing bad fiction and worse poetry in mimeographed magazines . . . How could I have forgotten?

"I wasn't going to tell anybody," he said. "No matter what happened. If they'd *looked* at me, just once, they would have seen. But as long as you're worrying so much about it—" He blinked, and said humbly, "It scares me. What do you think I ought to do?"

My fingers twitched. I said, "Well, this will take some thinking about, Harry. Uh, can I—"

He backed off absent-mindedly as I stepped toward him.

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't been to bed since yesterday morning. I worked on it straight through from four o'clock yesterday. Twenty hours. I took caffeine tablets. But go ahead, tell me. What would you do if you—" he said it apologetically—"were me?"

I swallowed. "I'd go at it slowly," I said. "You can make a lot of mistakes by—"

He interrupted me, with a sudden fiendish glint in his eye. "The man that has this is pretty important, don't you think?" And he grinned. "How would you like to see my face on all the stamps?"

I shuddered in spite of myself. "Well—"

"I wouldn't *bother,*" he said. "I've got something better to do first—"

"Harry," I said, leaning, "if I've said anything . . ."

"You didn't say anything." He gave me such a look as I hope I never get from a human again. "Big shot!"

I grabbed for him, but he was too quick. He leaped back, jamming the gadget into his pocket, fumbling at the spectacles with his other hand. I saw his feet lift clear of the pavement. He was hanging there like a mirage, drifting backward and upward just a little faster than I could run.

His voice came down, thin and clear: "I'll send you a postcard from . . ."

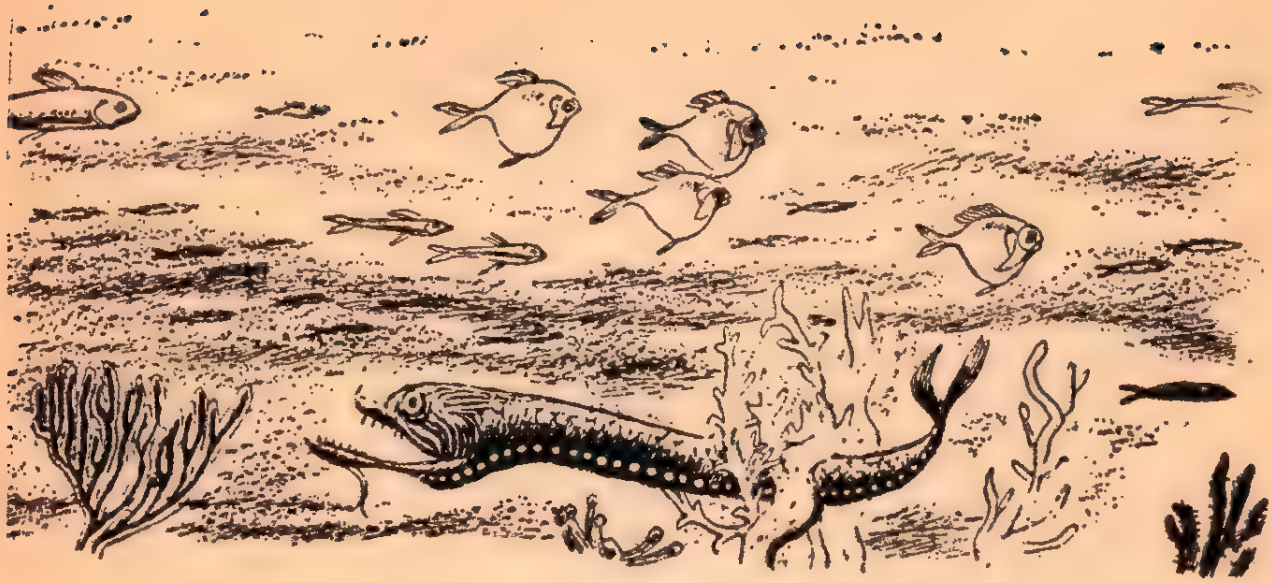
I lost the last part; anyhow, it couldn't have been what it sounded like.

JUST over a month later came Palomar's reports of unaccountable lights observed on the dark limb of Mars. Every science fiction reader in the world, I suppose had the same thought—of a wanderer's footprints fresh in the ancient dust, his handprints on controls not shaped for hands, the old wild light wakened. But only a few of us pictured hornrims gleaming there in the Martian night. . . .

I drove over to Milford and had a look through Ham Jibless' homemade telescope. I couldn't see the lights, of course, but I could see that damned infuriating planet, shining away ruddy there across 36,000,000 miles of space, with its eternal *Yah, yah, you can't catch me!*

MEDUSA meetings have been badly attended since then, I'm told; for some reason, it gives the members the green heaves to look at each other. ∞ ∞

SUBS
ENGLE



the engineer

The Big Wheels of tomorrow will be men who can see the big picture. But blowouts have small beginnings . . .

by FREDERIK POHL and C. M. KORNBLUTH

IT WAS very simple. Some combination of low temperature and high pressure had forced something from the seepage at the ocean bottom into combination with something in the water around them.

And the impregnable armor around Subatlantic Oil's drilling chamber had discovered a weakness.

On the television screen it looked more serious than it was—so Muhlenhoff told himself, staring at it grimly. You

get down more than a mile, and you're bound to have little technical problems. That's why deepsea oil wells were still there.

Still, it did look kind of serious. The water driving in the pitted faults had the pressure of eighteen hundred meters behind it, and where it struck it did not splash—it battered and destroyed. As Muhlenhoff watched, a bulkhead collapsed in an explosion of spray; the remote camera caught a tiny driblet of the scattering brine, and the picture in the screen fluttered and shrank, and came back with a wavering sidewise pulse.

Muhlenhoff flicked off the screen and marched into the room where the Engineering Board was waiting in attitudes of flabby panic.

As he swept his hand through his snow-white crew cut and called the board to order a dispatch was handed to him—a preliminary report from a quickly-dispatched company trouble - shooter team. He read it to the board, stone-faced.

A veteran heat-transfer man, the first to recover, growled:

"Some vibration thing—and seepage from the oil pool. Sloppy drilling!" He sneered. "Big deal! So a couple hundred meters of shaft have to be plugged and pumped. So six or eight compartments go pop. Since when did we start to believe the cack Research & Development hands out? Armor's armor. Sure it pops—when something makes it pop. If Atlantic oil was easy to get at, it wouldn't be here waiting for us now. Put a gang on the job. Find out what happened, make sure it doesn't happen again. Big deal!"

Muhlenhoff smiled his attractive smile. "Breck," he said, "thank God you've got guts. Perhaps we were in a bit of a panic. Gentlemen, I hope we'll all take heart from Mr. Breck's level-headed—what did you say, Breck?"

Breck didn't look up. He was pawing through the dispatch Muhlenhoff had dropped to the table. "*Nine*-inch plate," he read aloud, white-faced. "And time of installation, not quite seven weeks ago. If this goes on in a straight line—" he grabbed for a pocket slide-rule—"we have, uh—" he swallowed—"less time than the probable error," he finished.

"Breck!" Muhlenhoff yelled. "Where are you going?"

The veteran heat-transfer man said grimly as he sped

through the door: "To find a submarine."

The rest of the Engineering Board was suddenly pulling chairs toward the trouble-shooting team's dispatch. Muhlenhoff slammed a fist on the table.

"Stop it," he said evenly. "The next man who leaves the meeting will have his contract canceled. Is that clear, gentlemen? Good. We will now proceed to get organized."

He had them; they were listening. He said forcefully: "I want a task force consisting of a petrochemist, a vibrations man, a hydrostatics man and a structural engineer. Co-opt mathematicians and computermen as needed. I will have all machines capable of handling Fourier series and up cleared for your use. The work of the task force will be divided into two phases. For Phase One, members will keep their staffs as small as possible. The objective of Phase One is to find the cause of the leaks and predict whether similar leaks are likely elsewhere in the project. On receiving a first approximation from the force I will proceed to set up Phase Two, to deal with countermeasures."

He paused. "Gentlemen," he said, "we must not lose our nerves. We must not panic. Possibly the most serious technical crisis in Atlantic's history lies before us. Your most important job is to maintain—at all times—a cheerful, courageous attitude. We cannot, repeat cannot, afford to have the sub-technical staff of the project panicked for lack of a good example from us." He drilled each of them in turn with a long glare. "And," he finished, "if I hear of anyone suddenly discovering emergency business ashore, the man who does it better get fitted for a sludgemonkey's suit, because that's what he'll be tomorrow. Clear?"

Each of the executives assumed some version of a cheerful, courageous attitude. They looked ghastly, even to themselves.

MUHLENHOFF stalked into his private office, the nerve-center of the whole bulkheaded works.

In Muhlenhoff's private office, you would never know you were 1800 meters below the surface of the sea. It looked like any oilman's brass-hat office anywhere, complete to the beautiful blonde outside the door (but whitefaced and trembling), the potted palm (though the ends of its

fronds vibrated gently), and the typical section chief bursting in in the typical flap. "Sir," he whined, frenzied, "Section Six has pinholed! The corrosion—"

"Handle it!" barked Muhlenhoff, and slammed the door. Section Six be damned! What did it matter if a few of the old bulkheads pinholed and filled? The central chambers were safe, until they could lick whatever it was that was corroding. The point was, you had to stay with it and get out the oil; because if you didn't prove your lease, PetroMex would. Mexican oil wanted those reserves mighty badly.

Muhlenhoff knew how to handle an emergency. Back away from it. Get a fresh slant. Above all, *don't panic.*

He slapped a button that guaranteed no interruption and irritably, seeking distraction, picked up his latest copy of the *New New Review*—for he was, among other things, an intellectual as time allowed.

Under the magazine was the latest of several confidential communications from the home office. Muhlenhoff growled and tossed the magazine aside. He reread what Priestley had had to say:

"I know you understand the importance of beating our Spic friends to the Atlantic deep reserves, so I won't give you a hard time about it. I'll just pass it on the way Lundstrom gave it to me: 'Tell Muhlenhoff he'll come back on the Board or on a board, and no alibis or excuses.' Get it? Well—"

Hell. Muhlenhoff threw the sheet down and tried to think about the damned corrosion-leakage situation.

But he didn't try for long. There was, he realized, no point at all in him thinking about the problem. For one thing, he no longer had the equipment.

Muhlenhoff realized, wonderingly, that he hadn't opened a table of integrals for ten years; he doubted that he could find his way around the pages well enough to run down a tricky form. He had come up pretty fast through the huge technical staff of Atlantic. First he had been a geologist in the procurement section, one of those boots-and-leather-jacket guys who spent his days in rough, tough blasting and drilling and his nights in rarefied scientific air, correlating and integrating the findings of the day. Next he had been a Chief Geologist, chairborne director of youngsters, now

and then tackling a muddled report with Theory of Least Squares and Gibbs Phase Rule that magically separated dross from limpid fact . . . or, he admitted wryly, at least turning the muddled reports over to mathematicians who specialized in those disciplines.

Next he had been a Raw Materials Committee member who knew that drilling and figuring weren't the almighty things he had supposed them when he was a kid, who began to see the Big Picture of off-shore leases and depreciation allowances; of power and fusible rocks and steel for the machines, butane for the drills, plastics for the pipelines, metals for the circuits, the computers, the doors, windows, walls, tools, utilities. A committeeman who began to see that a friendly beer poured for the right resources-commission man was really more important than Least Squares or Phase Rule, because a resources commissioner who didn't get along with you might get along, for instance, with somebody from Coastwide, and allot to Coastwide the next available block of leases—thus working grievous harm to Atlantic and the billions it served. A committeeman who began to see that the Big Picture meant government and science leaning chummily against each other, government setting science new and challenging tasks like the billion-barrel procurement program, science backing government with all its tremendous prestige. You consume my waste hydrocarbons, Muhlenhoff thought comfortably, and I'll consume yours.

Thus mined, smelted and milled, Muhlenhoff was tempered for higher things. For the first, the technical directorate of an entire Atlantic Sub-Sea Petroleum Corporation district, and all wells, fields, pipelines, stills, storage fields, transport, fabrication and maintenance appertaining thereto. Honors piled upon honors. And then—

He glanced around him at the comfortable office. The top. Nothing to be added but voting stock and Board membership—and those within his grasp, if only he weathered this last crisis. And then the rarefied height he occupied alone.

And, by God, he thought, I do a damn good job of it! Pleasurably he reviewed his conduct at the meeting; he had already forgotten his panic. Those shaking fools would have brought the roof

down on us, he thought savagely. A few gallons of water in an unimportant shaft, and they're set to message the home office, run for the surface, abandon the whole project. The Big Picture! They didn't see it, and they never would. He might, he admitted, not be able to chase an integral form through a table, but by God he could give the orders to those who would. The thing was organized now; the project was rolling; the task force had its job mapped out; and somehow, although he would not do a jot of the brainwearing, eyestraining, actual work, it would be *his* job, because he had initiated it. He thought of the flat, dark square miles of calcareous ooze outside, under which lay the biggest proved untapped petroleum reserve in the world. Sector Fortyone, it was called on the hydrographic charts.

Perhaps, some day, the charts would say: *Muhlenhoff Basin.*

Well, why not?

THE emergency intercom was flickering its red call light pusillanimously. Muhlenhoff calmly lifted the handset off its cradle and ignored the tinny bleat. When you gave an order, you had to leave the men alone to carry it out.

He relaxed in his chair and picked up a book from the desk. He was, among other things, a student of Old American History, as time permitted.

Fifteen minutes now, he promised himself, with the heroic past. And then back to work refreshed!

Muhlenhoff plunged into the book. He had schooled himself to concentration; he hardly noticed when the pleading noise from the intercom finally gave up trying to attract his attention. The book was a study of that Mexican War in which the United States had been so astonishingly deprived of Texas, Oklahoma and points west under the infamous Peace of Galveston. The story was well told; Muhlenhoff was lost in its story from the first page.

Good thumbnail sketch of Presidente Lopez, artistically contrasted with the United States' Whitmore. More-in-sorrow-than-in-anger off-the-cuff psychoanalysis of the crackpot Texan Byerly, derisively known to Mexicans as "El Cacafuego." Byerly's raid at the head of his screwball irredentists, their prompt annihilation by the Mexican Third Armored Regiment,

Byerly's impeccably legal trial and execution at Tehuantepec. Stiff diplomatic note from the United States. Bland answer: Please mind your business, Senores, and we will mind ours. Stiffer diplomatic note. We said *please,* Senores, and can we not let it go at that? *Very* stiff diplomatic note; and Latin temper flares at last: Mexico severs relations.

Bad to worse. Worse to worst.

Massacre of Mexican nationals at San Antonio. Bland refusal of the United States federal government to interfere in "local police problem" of punishing the guilty. Mexican Third Armored raids San Antone, arrests the murderers (feted for weeks, their faces in the papers, their proud boasts of butchery retold everywhere), and hangs them before recrossing the border.

United States declares war. United States loses war—outmaneuvered, outgeneraled, out-logisticated, outgunned, outmanned.

And outfought.

Said the author:

"The colossal blow this cold military fact delivered to the United States collective ego is inconceivable to us today. Only a study of contemporary comment can make it real to the historian: The choked hysteria of the newspapers, the raging tides of suicides, Whitmore's impeachment and trial, the forced resignations of the entire General Staff—all these serve only to sketch in the national mood.

"Clearly something had happened to the military power which, within less than five decades previous, had annihilated the war machines of the Cominform and the Third Reich.

"We have the words of the contemporary military analyst, Osgood Ferguson, to explain it:

> "The rise of the so-called 'political general' means a decline in the efficiency of the army. Other things being equal, an undistracted professional beats an officer who is half soldier and half politician. A general who makes it his sole job to win a war will infallibly defeat an opponent who, by choice or constraint, must offend no voters of enemy ancestry, destroy no cultural or religious shrines highly regarded by the press, show leniency when leniency is fashionable at home, display condign firmness when the voters demand it (though it cause

his zone of communications to blaze up into a fury of guerrilla clashes), choose his invasion routes to please a state department apprehensive of potential future ententes.

"It is unfortunate that most of Ferguson's documentation was lost when his home was burned during the unsettled years after the war. But we know that what Mexico's Presidente Lopez said to his staff was: 'My generals, win me this war.' And this entire volume does not have enough space to record what the United States generals were told by the White House, the Congress as a whole, the Committees on Military Affairs, the Special Committees on Conduct of the War, the State Department, the Commerce Department, the Interior Department, the Director of the Budget, the War Manpower Commission, the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, the Steel lobby, the Oil lobby, the Labor lobby, the political journals, the daily newspapers, the broadcasters, the ministry, the Granges, the Chambers of Commerce. However, we do know—unhappily—that the United States generals obeyed their orders. This sorry fact was inscribed indelibly on the record at the Peace of Galveston."

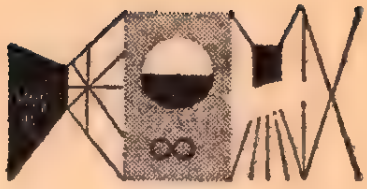
MUHLENHOFF yawned and closed the book. An amusing theory, he thought, but thin. Political generals? Nonsense.

He was glad to see that his subordinates had given up their attempt to pass responsibility for the immediate problem to his shoulders; the intercom had been silent for many minutes now. It only showed, he thought comfortably, that they had absorbed his leading better than they knew.

He glanced regretfully at the door that had sheltered him, for this precious refreshing interlude, from the shocks of the project outside. Well, the interlude was over; now to see about this leakage thing. Muhlenhoff made a note, in his tidy card-catalog mind, to have Maintenance on the carpet. The door was bulging out of true. Incredible sloppiness! And some damned fool had shut the locks in the ventilating system. The air was becoming stuffy.

Aggressive and confident, the political engineer pressed the release that opened the door to the greatest shock of all. ∞ ∞

Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

In each issue, Mr. Knight will review a new book which he considers unique enough for special consideration.

THE PARADOX MEN, by Charles L. Harness. An Ace Double Novel Book (with Jack Williamson's "Dome Around America"), 35¢.

This brilliant novel, first published in *Startling Stories* as "Flight Into Yesterday," represents the peak of Harness' published work; Harness told me in 1950 that he had spent two years writing the story, and had put into it every fictional idea he had in that time.

He must have studied his model with painstaking care. You'll find here the gaudy van Vogtian empire; the story crackling with the tension of love-plus-hatred; the brutal swiftness of the plotting; the mutant superman who's unaware of his own extraordinary powers, and who must contend not only with his enemies, but with his suspicious friends; the philosophical (or medical, or historical) system elevated into a Rule For Everything; yes, even the misplaced jocularity, the impossible but fascinating conversations, the double-takes, the stage asides, and the exasperating nothing-statements that were typical of van Vogt at his height.

—And all this, packed even more tightly than the original, symmetrically arranged, the loose ends tucked in, and every last outrageous twist of the plot fully justified both in science and in logic. For instance, the mingling of atomic power and swordplay in Harness' 22nd-century empire looks typically van Vogtian—until you notice that Harness has provided an elaborate and thoroughly convincing technological reason for the use of swords.

A basic premise of all pulp fiction, from which magazine science fiction is derived, is that only the fear of imminent, violent death can make the human psyche function at its full intensity.* Harness carries the consequences of this notion as far as they will go. Re-reading this book reminded me of Campbell's description of "World of Null-A": "...like a 550 volt A.C. power line; it looks innocent, but once you get hold of it you can't let go till somebody shuts off the power."

The sheer quantity of violent events in the story is enough to hold you, even though they're so compressed as to be almost drained of emotional meaning: while falling apparently to his death from a "mile-high" window, for instance, Harness' hero Alar reflects, "He would not live to tell his companion Thieves that his reaction to death was simply a highly intensified observation." An atomic attack on America destined to destroy the locale of the story "to a depth of several miles" serves Harness for the background to one brief climactic scene; the duel between Alar and his most dangerous opponent takes place in a "solarion," a sort of solar raft, which is sliding to destruction in the middle of a sunspot.

Burned in an incinerator, tortured insensible, stunned by explosions, run through in a duel, Alar merely bounds on to more strenuous adventures, his pulse rate responding (in advance!) to each mortal danger, but his brain ticking along like a well-adjusted clock.

For every peril, the developing superman has a new and more impudent answer. There's a limit beyond which this kind of thing turns to farce, and Harness has passed it more than once. I give you the scene in which Alar is trying to escape from a guardsman by emitting electromagnetic radiation from his eyes, and so transmitting false orders to the guard's button radio.

> Alar's eyes were growing beady and feverish but nothing was happening.
>
> He knew he was capable of emitting photic beams in the infra-red with a wave length of at least half a millimeter. The U.H.F. intercom band certainly shouldn't exceed a meter. Yet his eyes were pouring

*And it might be argued that the wider incidence of just this fear since about 1945 has been a factor in the decline of the pulps.

out the electromagnetic spectrum from a few Angstroms to several meters, without raising a squeak in the receptor button.

Something had gone wrong. He was aware of Keiris' body shivering near his side.

Suddenly the button whistled. The officer stopped uncertainly.

A bead of perspiration slid down Alar's cheek and dangled at his stubbled chin.

"A.M.," said Keiris quietly.

Blackout! But even this is not enough to tear through the web of compulsion Harness' story weaves. If you get a surfeit of the sledgehammer plot, there's a highly technical scientific argument to engage your attention; if that palls, there's the uncommonly intense and evocative sub-plot concerning the heroine, Keiris; and if you should become bored with that, look out, here comes the sledgehammer again!

. . . Plus the fact that, if you have read Harness before, you know you can trust him to wind up this whole ultracomplicated structure, somehow, symmetrically and without fakery.

Finally, when it's all done, the story means something. Harness' theme is the triumph of spirit over flesh: again and again, his protagonists survive crippling mutilations—Follansbee in "Fruits of the Agathon" is blinded, Keiris in "The Paradox Men" loses both arms—and press on, as cheerfully as if they had merely lost a slipper, to new peaks of experience—often as not, to death and transfiguration. This is the rock under all Harness' hypnotic cats'-cradles of invention—faith in the spirit, the denial of pain, the affirmation of eternal life.

∞ ∞ ∞

NEW YORK IN 1956! What promises to be the biggest and best convention of science-fiction readers, writers, artists and editors will be held this year in the world's biggest city. The time: Labor Day week-end. The place: Hotel Waldorf-Astoria. The entertainment is sure to be tops, and you'll be able to meet your favorite professionals and talk things over with them. To get your membership card, and all the news about the program while it's hot, send your $2.00 registration fee now to: 14th World Science-Fiction Convention, P. O. Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19, N. Y.

Feedback

IDEAS make science fiction—and your ideas will help make INFINITY the kind of science-fiction magazine you want it to be. Send your letters to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, Inc., 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.

June, 1926: THE STAR by HG Wells appears in the third issue of the first of all stf magazines, *Amazing Stories*.

November, 1955: THE STAR by *today's* greatest British exponent of sci-fi is featured in the first issue of INFINITY. Frankly, Clarke's tour of the Universe was the star story of the issue to me, worth the price of admission. Also had the best illustration. I may as well say I detest the diarrhetic school of art as exemplified by most of the "loose" drawings you have in the book. John Giunta is the only one who draws something recognizable, altho Engle was acceptable (even thot-provoking) in color on the cover. His bride's waistline would make Vampira green with envy. (On second thot, she's already green with gangrene and mold; but perhaps jealousy would turn her a deeper shade of jade.)

To return to THE STAR: Arthur Clarke has written a "nova" in more ways than one. All the Wise Men weren't at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

The Damon Knight book review was the icing on the cake: chocolate, my favorite flavor. Knight must never fall.

May an infinity of ever-improving issues stretch before you.—Forrest J Ackerman, 915 So. Sherbourne Dr., Los Angeles 35, Calif.

I read every decent science-fiction publication on the market, plus a number of mediocre ones in the hopes they will improve; having just finished, in one sitting, your first issue of INFINITY, I can truthfully say that I hail with delight a new arrival of the high caliber of this magazine. It ties for first place in my estimation with "Galaxy."

My favorite story: "The Star" by Clarke. "The First" by Ludwig is my second choice;

"The Sickness" comes third. All stories are uniformly good. Illustrations are excellent, and not overdone. The "Fanfare" department has a gem in "The Siren of Space," by Dave Jenrette.

I would like to compliment also: *The Editorial,* straightforwardly written and pleasantly lacking in obscure and pointless meandering, the *solidity* of the magazine, with maximum reading material, minimum "filler," and finally the fact that all stories are complete; I loathe serials that drag on for months.

My one complaint is that two months will elapse before your next issue, which I'll be impatiently awaiting. Were I not a person whose business calls for much traveling, I'd enclose a subscription check. Keep up the good work! —B. Travers-Smith, 52 Temple St., Apt. 5, Boston 15, Mass.

Thank you, sir. We'll be monthly as soon as it's financially feasible; we can hardly wait, personally.—Ed.

The first issue earns superlatives.

Arthur Clarke's story comes close to being literature. Next best, in just the order you have them on the cover, come William Tenn's and James Blish's.

The only stories I didn't enjoy thoroughly were McCormack's (the "science" was so tedious to my taste that I did not finish it), Bloch's "Have Tux . . ." (too longwindedly colloquial) and Ludwig's "The First" (too I don't know what —maudlin, maybe).

It's about time somebody has recognized that there are things in the fan magazines that deserve wider audience than they receive in hekto or mimeo. Jenrette's Fanfare yarn is a pleasant science fictionalization of an old joke, and maybe the tongue made too big a bulge in the cheek, but what the heck, it was fun. (*Just for the record, we knew the wheelbarrow joke—one of our old favorites, in fact. —Ed.*) And I'm glad to hear you make token payment when you reprint. One suggestion: run the title and byline in bold face after your introduction; if a story's good enough to reprint it deserves a regular byline.

Which reminds me: a story that originally appeared in my old fanmag, Escape, has had a notable afterlife. Of course the fact that its author was Cyril Kornbluth had something to do with it. Its title was "The Rocket of 1955" and it appeared in Escape in 1939. It went pro in 1941 in Stirring Science Stories, was reprinted in 1951 by Damon Knight in Worlds Beyond, and most recently was included by Cyril in his 1954 Ballantine collection, "The Explorers." I just thought, while it's still 1955 (*Sure, it is! —Ed.*), that I'd get it on the record that you saw it first in Escape.

INFINITY'S artists, especially Robert Engle, are top-notch.

That old fan artist, John Giunta, also does a nice job. The make-up, from front cover through the occasional spot sketches, is excellent. And it was nice you got the SF Book Club ad for the back cover instead of the truss ad it might have been.

All in all, an exciting first issue. In the words of Pooh-Bah, long life to you! —Richard Wilson, Little Tor Road, New City, N. Y.

I enjoyed the first ish of INFINITY very much. Especially the short story *The First*. Who knows, that may be the case right now. Let's have more of Arthur C. Clarke. He's destined to be the H. G. Wells of the mid-century. The great humor of Robert Bloch always gets me where it hurts, in the funny-bone.

I see that the theme of the number one INFINITY was the first space flight, the first space station, and the first moon base. This is what the general public is interested in and I think you got off on the right foot. I sincerely hope that you can get the financial support to keep on buying the stories of name authors. (*So do we.—Ed.*)

Say, Larry, is William Tenn the pen-name of Harlan Ellison? NO? Well then, which one of the little gems belonged to Harlan? —W. N. Beard, 719 W. 7th, Muncie, Ind.

Purely mechanical problems squeezed Harlan's story out of the first issue, into this one. A shame, but he'll be in many future issues too. —Ed.

I like the magazine, the feel or personality or whatever it is of it; had this same feeling, I remember, about the first issue of Lester del Rey's Space. What it is, I think, is the sense that the editor is on my side. I don't expect prodigies but will buy and read the magazine anyway, just because I trust you not to fling pastel-tinted garbage in my face. I want honest science fiction; you want honest science fiction; we agree. It seems little enough to ask, but where the hell else can you get it? (*Hardly, any more. —Ed.*)

I read Phil's THE SICKNESS, which is more than I've been able to do for any other recent Klass story. Predictable, but I liked it. B.

Marks' KID STUFF I hate. Violently and irrationally. (*With both heads? —Ed.*) C.

Bloch's HAVE TUX—WILL TRAVEL I read; no other Bloch story since 1942 can make that statement. Awful predictable, but pleasant. B.

Blish's KING OF THE HILL could have been a wonder, if only he'd kept it in the madman's vp. The rest of the story seems to me slack and prosaic. B.

Ludwig's THE FIRST—*awful* predictable, but I read it. B.

Mason's PLACEBO I like. Funny. B.

McCormack's PHANTOM DUEL, which I forgot to stick

in where it belongs, I couldn't finish. Disappointing to me, because I'd been looking for more McC ever since I bought one of his for Worlds Beyond. Couldn't tell the characters apart, didn't give a damn about the plot. C.

And Clarke's THE STAR, of course, is a natural. That thumping is the sound of 300 s-f writers kicking themselves for not thinking of it first. Damn the man! A.

Liked Fanfare, though I thought the story was even funnier when it was about wheelbarrows.

Technical notes: I think the caps you're using after interior breaks look ugly and odd without initials, and wish you'd drop them. (*We think you're purty, too. — Ed.*) — Damon Knight, P. O. Box 164, Milford, Pike Co., Pa.

For what my opinion may be worth, your taste in stories is good, but that is according to one reader who believes in leaving choices to editors; there doesn't seem to be any mechanical substitute for good personal judgment, plus luck. Are you trying to be very eclectic and include everything from thudnblunder to delicatessences? You can spread yourself too thin that way, but still it's your business. Certainly readers of such fiction are eclectic too.

What I mainly wanted to praise is the idea of reviewing something you consider very good, and ignoring all else. Splendid idea. Of course, if Royal gets out such a thing you'll be in a split stick. Otherwise it makes good reading, interesting commentary, and probably is more inciting to purchase. Poor Dick, though; will his hat ever fit again?

Also I like the lack of letters from readers—one should address the public via editors by means of real writing or not at all, yes? (*No. —Ed.*)— Alma Hill, 230 Clarendon St., Boston, Mass.

Before breaking the first issue of your new mag into its component parts for examination and individual discussion, I'd just like to say that a great new publication like yours is bound to give the ailing field of science fiction that badly needed shot in the arm. I, after reading it, would like to shake the hand of every man and woman whose work made INFINITY what it is.

Frankly, it's as close to the perfect stf mag as I have ever seen. Even if INFINITY folds (Ghu forbid!), you should be remembered for this one.

The fiction is perfectly balanced, and ranges from good humor to intricate philosophy. With light-hearted efforts by Bob Bloch and fan-turning-pro Dave Mason on one hand, serious "thinkpieces" by William Tenn and Arthur Clarke on the other, and adventure tales by Ford McCormack and James Blish thrown in for good

measure, you have almost every type of stf story that there is represented. It's a lot more fun to read INFINITY than to wade through a $3 anthology, too.

"The Sickness" showed me a new side to the prolific William Tenn. Up until now, I have always regarded Tenn as strictly a writer of humorous fiction, but his latest proves how wrong I had been. It's just about the best story by a science-fiction writer on the "cold war" that I've seen. I was truly surprised; it was much better than I expected it to be.

There's not much you can say about "Kid Stuff." It was in Marks' best vein, and was enjoyed. As for "Have Tux—Will Travel," I never laughed so loud in years! Well, it was by Bob Bloch, so how could it miss?

James Blish's new series of stories about the CIG are great, and could conceivably equal his well-known "Okie" series of past years. I thought that "King of the Hill" was much better, however, than the first CIG story, "One-Shot," which appeared recently in *Astounding*. (*JB has promised us more CIG stories soon. —Ed.*)

I have never seen any other work by Ford McCormack, so I can't compare "Phantom Duel" to past work. I do know that I liked it very much, though, and that's putting it rather mildly. This is the kind of adventure story that modern stf needs, not the juvenile trash that other editors seem to think will do the trick.

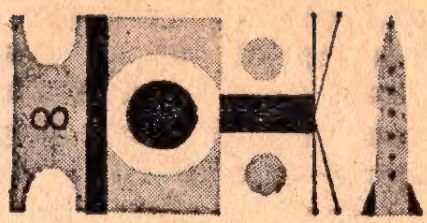
Finally, there is "The Star." As far as yours truly is concerned, this is the greatest story of shorter length that Clarke has ever done. Even to an old un-believer like me, the brilliance of its message comes across like the oft-mentioned arc lamp. Please, please, *please* print more like this one!

Perhaps what strikes me as being best about your magazine is the fact that you seem to be aware that the fan has an interest in your magazine also. (*We heard his still small voice murmuring. —Ed.*) "Fanfare," to me, is the best thing that a prozine has done for fandom since the old "Fanmag" features in Science Fiction Adventures. I didn't particularly care for the story you chose, however; what about reprinting some of the fanzine work by Harlan Ellison, Bob Silverberg, Jim Harmon, or Bob Bloch, eh? (*We'd like to avoid using stuff by pros if possible; although Grennell is by no means strictly an amateur, either. But such suggestions are more than welcome. —Ed.*)

Keep up the splendid work, and you'll be among the mythical "Big 3" in no time at all. In fact, keep printing issues like this first one, and it'll be impossible to leave you out! — Kenn Curtis, 4722 Peabody Ave., Cincinnati 27, Ohio. *Wow! —Ed.*

∞ ∞ ∞

By the editor



THE SENSE OF *HUH?*

SCIENCE FICTION has a split personality. Superficially, it appears to be a brash young extrovert. Beneath the surface, it's as self-conscious as you can get.

The sermon for today concerns the introverted side.

Practically every editor, writer, reviewer and just plain fan has appointed himself an official witch-hunter, the witch being a hideous crone maliciously casting spells to prevent the stuff from selling as well as it should.

The witch sometimes turns out to be a persecution complex, sometimes an inferiority ditto. Lack of public acceptance may be due, on the one hand, to a subversive plot by the Love Story Writers of America. On the other, it's science fiction's own fault because some essential ingredient has vanished from modern stories.

An ingredient like, often and often, the "'sense of wonder."

This "sense of wonder" was always present in early science fiction, we are told. In the good old days, writers had a real grasp of the awesomeness of the universe and were capable of transmitting it to the readers. They could, in short, surprise you. They were not sophisticated and blasé, as they have become today.

Well . . . there may be something to this, but it seems to me to fall pretty wide of the mark. When someone says "sense of wonder" to me, I get an automatic mental image of an 18-year-old third-grader from Odunk, at a traveling tent show, gawping in amazement at the half-man-half-woman and wondering if he-she's for real.

How can I reasonably expect science-fiction writers to surprise me with new gadgets or theories when I can buy (or at least walk into a showroom and see) an automobile with push-button controls, load-levelizer suspension and a hi-fi set in the glove compartment—and not be surprised? When city fathers talk seriously of replacing subway shuttle trains with continuous-belt slideways? When

radios are the size of cigarette packages? When we're on the doorstep of licking everything from cancer to outer space, and even the fabulously mysterious human mind itself?

I don't say there are no new gadgets or theories left. But whatever they are, the announcements won't surprise me when I hear them. And this is not because I'm sophisticated and blasé—I'm not— but simply because everyday experience has given me an economy-sized faith that science and technology can do practically anything they decide to do.

I'll be impressed, sure, but not surprised. And I have no right to expect science fiction to surprise me, either.

This is not to say that the characters in the stories should never be surprised. Good plotting obviously demands that they should—the more often the better, up to a point. But too many science-fiction stories, in recent years, have been about people with so little understanding of their environment that they are at a complete loss as to what is going on. This demonstrably does not make for good stories.

What *is* lacking in a lot of modern science fiction, it seems to me, is not a sense of wonder but a sense of *fun* (or vigor, or gusto). When a writer really enjoys doing a story, the result stands out like that man in Philadelphia who doesn't read the Bulletin.

Science fiction has always been, and will remain, a literature of ideas. That doesn't necessarily mean new ideas, which are rare. But old ideas can be developed in new and different ways. Gag writers make splendid livings doing just that; why can't science-fiction writers do the same?

Like many others, "sense of wonder" started out as a rather useful phrase. It has been used by respectable mainstream critics— H. L. Mencken, for one. But science-fiction's critics seem to have equated it with pure gadgetry, which we have outgrown. We can use gadgetry as a starting point for a story, sure. But the characters in the story should be able to understand and manipulate the gadgets. Otherwise, who wants to read about them?

For my money, the best science fiction is written by people who enjoy thinking about familiar things in unfamiliar ways. *Not* by people whose minds are wiped clean every night, so that they can be amazed because the sun comes up the next morning.

I can continue to feel pride in my own intellect, and be mentally stimulated at the same time, if my reaction to a story is: "Now, why didn't *I* think of that?" The combination is, for me, much pleasanter and more genuine than the emotional satisfaction I get from playing peekaboo with a two-year-old child. —*The Editor.*

—continued from Back Cover

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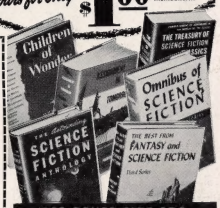
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